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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

No. 602.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., May 7, 1890.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLVII.



OR,

The Blue Coats of the Big Horn.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "HUSTLER HARRY, THE COWBOY
SPORT," "OLD DISMAL," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THREE FORTUNE-HUNTERS.

THE sun was slowly sinking behind the western peaks when three horsemen halted on an eminence overlooking a narrow valley amid the Big Horn Mountains. Men and horses looked weary and fatigued, as if they had lately made a long and tiresome journey, and it was with a sigh of relief that one of the men waved his hand toward the valley at their feet and said:

"We'll camp down there ter-nite, pards."

He was the recognized leader of the little party, who were apparently prospectors, a fact which the small mining outfit that they carried proclaimed. He was slightly above medium height, and although there was not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon his entire body, his frame was of unusually large proportions. From his feet up he was built of bone and sinew, and his ap-

"HARK!" SHE EXCLAIMED, "CAN'T YOU HEAR THEM? LISTEN!" THE THREE MINERS LISTEN INTENTLY BUT CAN HEAR NO UNUSUAL SOUND.

pearance seemed to indicate that there was a superabundance of bone; indeed, at first sight one received the impression that the man was built more of skin and bones than anything else. This was easily accounted for by the fact that he possessed high cheek-bones and a protruding under jaw, over which the dark, sun-tanned flesh is tightly drawn, giving him an appearance decidedly ferocious. His hands are large and unshapely with huge joints, which stand out like little knobs all over them. But, any man who had ever tested Montana Jim's strength would declare that he was built of muscle as well as bone.

This singular-appearing man was dressed in mud-bespattered clothes with the faded blue woolen shirt such as was usually worn by miners and prospectors at that time. His pant legs were tucked into the tops of a pair of high boots, which from their appearance, had seen rough service and plenty of it. On his head was a slouched felt hat, from beneath which fell a tangled mass of iron-gray hair. The belt around his waist contained two revolvers and a knife, while a handsome Winchester repeater was slung at his back.

Taken for what he appeared, James Farley would have been a ruffian of a decidedly unscrupulous character. But he was far from the ruffian. Beneath that rough exterior was a heart tender and considerate as a woman's, and never was Montana Jim known to go back on a friend in trouble. At the sight of distress, a tender, pitying light would creep into his keen, dark eyes, and his misshapen hands were ever ready to do what they could for the unfortunate one. Really the man's beardless, bull-dog-appearing face gave his true nature the lie, and his usually harsh, unpleasant voice could be soft and mild at times.

At Jim's right Handy Harry sat astride his jaded horse. His true name was Tracy Harrison, but after the manner of the country, it had given place to a *nom* which those who knew him best seemed to think more appropriate.

Harrison was a card-sharp, gambler, adventurer—all told, a dangerous man who lived by his wits. It was because of his proficiency with "the papers" that he was called Handy Harry. He was under thirty years of age and was a handsomely built man, not even the rough, ill-fitting clothes which he wore now for the first time in his life being able to conceal his physical perfection. His features were partially concealed by nearly a month's growth of amber-colored beard, but his straight, regular nose and sharp blue eyes seem to say that, when smoothly shaved, his face was an agreeable one. His wide-brimmed hat was shoved back upon his head, revealing a broad expanse of forehead, over which dropped a single curl of reddish-brown hair. With the exception of the rifle at his back, not a weapon was visible about his person, but his companions knew that he could produce a pair of self-cocking revolvers at an instant's notice—and he knew how to use them.

Upon the horse to the left of Montana Jim was the eccentric man of the party. He was dressed nearly the same as his companions and carried a rifle and belt of weapons like those which Jim displayed. His face was covered with a bristling brown beard, evidently kept constantly clipped. His eyes were blue, but had not the keen, piercing look possessed by the card-sharp's. He was rather good-looking, but there was something strange about his constant air of gloom and nervousness. His eccentricity consisted of rarely speaking unless addressed, and for this reason he was known as Silent Seth. What his proper name was his companions had been unable to learn, and they had not questioned him very closely about his past life as such a thing was considered "very unhealthy" in that part of the country; but, both had come to the conclusion that there was some mystery about the silent man and his past—something which he feared to disclose.

The three fortune-hunters—for such they were—had penetrated the fastnesses of the Big Horn Range in search for the Lost Gold Placer, of which wondrous tales were told long before the discovery of the precious metal in the Black Hills was heralded to the world. This placer was supposed to exist somewhere in the heart of the wild and picturesque Big Horn Mountains of Northern Wyoming, and more than one venturesome prospector had lost his life while searching for it. It is quite a mystery how the story of the Lost Placer originated, but it was given wide-spread circulation in the camps of Montana, Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho, and hundreds of luckless miners longed for the Croesus-like wealth which was said to lay shimmering in a pool at the foot of a small waterfall in the heart of the Big Horn Mountains.

How three men of such widely different tastes, and presenting such a contrast in outward appearance, should come to unite their fortunes in a search for the Lost Placer it would be difficult to tell, but, certain it is that they did so, and with their bosoms filled with hope, started out upon the hazardous undertaking of wresting wealth from a land filled with red-men who were already wild with murderous rage by the bold encroachments of the whites upon their territory.

Montana Jim, as an old prospector, was inured to the hardships of life amid the mountains far from settlement or human habitation, and for this reason he was chosen as the leader of the party—his pards consulting him upon all things with which they were unfamiliar and abiding by his judgment. Jim considered himself pretty level-headed on almost everything concerning mining matters, and it pleased his vanity to have his comrades ask his opinion. Never had it been Jim's fortune to "strike it rich," but it was one of his chief delights to tell how near he had come to making his fortune on several occasions.

"Oh, I'm goin' ter hit it by an' by," he would grimly declare. "It's bound ter cum, sooner or later, if not afore. All I've got ter do is hang dog an' never let up till I git my fingers on ther wealth. It's er mighty quare trail that hain't got no crooks inter it. I've cum mighty nigh it lots o' times, an' at last I'll cum nigh ernuff ter hit it."

In this way perhaps the man showed the unyielding perseverance and bull-dog determination of his nature. As he was at least fifty-five years of age and had been roughing it amid the mountains and mines for nearly thirty years, his courage deserved and commanded admiration.

It was a singular thing for a man of Handy Harry's nature to desert the gaming-room and take to the hazardous life of the hills. It was a singular thing for him to give up "prospecting" with the cards to take to prospecting with pick and pan. But he was a singular man in more ways than one, for, although a gambler, with something of a "hard" reputation, it was said that he was "squar" as er brick" and had a heart "big as er bucket." An honest gambler is something of a *rara avis* wherever he is found, but Harry's friends—and he had scores of them—asserted that he was "honest clean through." Of course the man had enemies; no man can follow such a doubtful occupation and not have plenty of them. But the man was utterly reckless and almost devoid of fear, so he cared about as much for his enemies as he did for the flies which pestered him on a hot day.

From his appearance it was difficult to decide what had been Silent Seth's occupation before he took to the mountains and mines. Harry was inclined to think that he had been a respectable man of business in some Eastern city, but had met with a big financial loss that had driven him to his present life, and made him the silent, sober man that he was. This sober air, together with the fact that he had never heard Seth utter an oath, caused Jim to believe that he had once been a "Gospel-sharp," and had possibly lost his place in the church through some deed committed while tempted by the Evil One.

The three men gazed down into the valley below with some interest. They were to camp down there for the night, and all were decidedly tired. Their eyes quickly noticed that a small stream ran through the valley, and simultaneously the same thought flashed through their minds. Finally Harry gave it utterance.

"We may find the Placer down there! Why not?"

"Yes, we may," admitted the old prospector; "but you want ter remember ther chances are er good menny ergin' it. It hain't no easy job ther we've undertaken, an' 'tain't hafe likely as we'll fall inter a puddin' at ther fu'st jump. Don't ye count too much on findin' ennythin' down thar."

The card-sharp laughed a little.

"Don't you worry about me, old man; I never put any too much confidence in the story about the Lost Placer, and I shall not be badly disappointed if we do not find it at all."

This touches Jim in a tender spot, for he has great faith in the existence of the Placer.

"Ef ye didn't believe ther story, w'at ye hyer fer?" he snaps, sharply. "You're a blamed fool ter go rantin' roun' huntin' arter suthin' as ye don't believes exists!"

"I came to see the country, James," is the calm reply. "I am a great lover of nature, you know."

The old mountain-man utters a sniff of disgust, as he observes:

"You may see more'n ye want. This is Injun-land, an' ther thar skulp o' yourn w'u'd meck an ellygant ornamin' in a Sioux wigwam."

"They are welcome to these natural curls if they can get them," is the laughing retort.

A few moments later the three begin the descent. Darkness finds them reclining on their blankets close under a fringe of bushes which grow close to an overhanging bank. The horses have been unsaddled and picketed where they can feed, after having a long, refreshing draught from the clear stream. From the saddle-bags the men have produced such food as was therein contained, and being very hungry, as well as tired, have made quite a meal, the dry bread and meat being washed down by clear cold water from the stream. They do not build a fire to-night as it is not an absolute necessity, and they are in a country where a blaze might betray them to hostile foes.

The for one-hunters do not talk much to-night, but lie upon their blankets smoking their pipes

in silence, their thoughts carrying them far from their surroundings. The horses near at hand are steadily feeding upon the luxuriant grass which surrounds them. Far, far away a mountain wolf howls mournfully.

At an early hour Harry and Seth roll themselves in their blankets and are soon fast asleep. Montana Jim still sits pulling steadily at his pipe in the darkness. He is to act as guard the first part of the night; later, one of the sleepers will take his place. There is no moon the first of the night, but the sentinel knows that it will rise later and flood the valley with its light.

When Jim becomes tired of smoking he puts the black pipe away, gets upon his feet and walks around a little. This he does at intervals to keep himself awake. Thus the first of the night wears away.

The sentinel is reclining upon his blanket and has nearly fallen asleep when he suddenly and silently starts up and listens, every sense on the alert, for he fancies that he has heard a suspicious sound. The moon is about to rise above the eastern peaks, but the shadows are still dense in the little valley.

"Ther ole man warn't mistook," flashes through the listener's head, as his hand falls upon the butt of a revolver and he peers steadily into the darkness.

Suddenly he is startled by the harsh cry of a wandering night-bird as it sweeps down the valley, but after that he can only hear the faint gurgle of the brook.

"I believe I heard cat-like footsteps," mentally declares the keen-eared prospector. "I'm goin' ter investigate."

And, silently cocking a revolver, he stealthily arises and creeps cautiously into the darkness toward the spot where he fancies he heard the sound.

CHAPTER II.

WOMAN OR WITCH—THE NIGHT RIDERS.

AFTER a long time Montana Jim returned to his sleeping companions, not having succeeded in finding anything of an unusual nature in the vicinity. The horses are all right and there seems to be no living creature around the camp but the fortune-hunters and their animals. Slowly the moon creeps up from behind the eastern peaks and sends her light down into the valley, but this fails to reveal anything to Jim's keen eyes save the horses and the dark shadows of the rocks and bushes.

"I reckon I'd better take a bit o' er snooze now," mutters the veteran, casting one more searching glance around. "I'll let Harry take my place an' keep an eye out fer snags."

Then he arouses the sleeping sport and briefly instructs him in regard to his duties, saying in conclusion:

"I thort I heard sum 'un creepin' roun' ther camp jest afore moon-up. I hain't often mistook 'bout sech things, but I failed ter fine er soul w'en I scouted 'round. Fer all thet, thar may be sum 'un roun' ther place, so don't git ter snoozin', 'less ye wants yer ha'r lifted by sum prowlin' red varmint."

Then he rolled himself in his blanket and was asleep in less than a minute.

Handy Harry smiled at the sound of the old prospector's heavy breathing came to his ears.

"He drops off easy," laughs the new guard, softly. "And I notice that he awakens just as easy. I don't believe that he considered the danger of being scalped while he slept of very great importance. He probably told me that story about hearing something just to keep me wide-awake."

After walking back and forth in the shadows a dozen times or so to wake himself up thoroughly, he flings himself down upon his blanket and amuses himself by listening to the nocturnal sounds with which the air seems to be laden—strange, faint, rustling sounds that sound like spirit footsteps. Suddenly he starts up, more than half convinced that he really hears soft, phantom-like steps.

"Bosh!" he finally exclaims, after peering sharply around and seeing nothing but the rocks and shadows. "Jim's story has shaken my nerves. I ought to be ashamed of it!"

Then he lies back and becomes unconscious of the rustling sounds. But he is to be convinced that his imagination is not responsible for what he believed he heard.

The careless guard was more than half asleep when the night air was suddenly rent by a wild and almost unearthly cry, followed by a burst of laughter that was fairly blood-chilling. In an instant the three fortune-hunters were on their feet, weapons in hand.

"Tornaders an' v'arthquakes! w'at were thet?" gasped Montana Jim, as he glared around.

As if in reply, another burst of laughter rung out. Then, standing in the full light of the moon a short distance away, the three men saw a strange-appearing figure, evidently that of a woman!

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the apparition, wildly flinging aloft its arms. "I am here—I am here! I am White Hair, the Mountain Witch. That is what the men of black eyes and red skins call

me. I am a thing of the shadows, but I ride on the moonbeams!"

"Great Scott!" came hoarsely from the veteran prospector's lips, as he shrunk back a pace.

Well might the strange creature be called White Hair, the Witch. She was dressed entirely in black, but her head was uncovered and down over her shoulders floated a mass of snow-white hair. Her face, as revealed by the moonlight, also seemed ghastly white as that of a corpse.

Tracy Harrison remained in his tracks, a drawn revolver in his hand, just as he was when he sprung to his feet on being aroused by that first wild cry; but, unlike Montana Jim, the silent man of the party took a step forward and stared steadily at the wild-looking woman.

"I have come to warn you," continued the white-haired being. "You have come to these mountains to find a fortune, but if you are not careful, you will each find a grave. Ha! ha! There are graves amid the mountains—graves of other white men who came to search for the yellow fortune you are after. Sometimes their comrades buried them, but oftener their bones rotted in the lonely depths of dark ravines. They all met their doom—they are dead!"

Involuntarily a shudder ran over the nerves of the three fortune-seekers. It seemed as if the wild creature was pronouncing their doom. Montana Jim shrunk still further back into the shadows.

"Are you listening?" demanded the woman, sharply. "It will be well for you to listen and take heed. The fortune for which you seek will never be yours. It may be here, deep in the mountains, but it is not for you. Turn back! Turn back!"

Then for several moments the woman was silent and seemed to be listening.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, with uplifted hand. "Can't you hear them? Listen!"

The three miners listen intently but can hear no unusual sound. But the white-haired woman seems to hear something.

"They are coming!" she finally exclaims. "There are mounted men coming this way! Their faces are white, but their hearts are black as midnight! Beware of them! They are the friends of the red-men who hate the pale-faces. They are coming down this very valley! Do not let them find you here! Mount—mount and dash away!"

Again she is silent, with one hand to her ear, and her head bent in a listening attitude.

"They ride as if their horses are very tired," she mutters, just loud enough for the listening men to hear her words. "They have been on a very long journey. Their hands are stained with blood—with blood! Ha! ha! ha! It is the blood of their own race! They love blood!"

"But see! They have a captive with them! It is a girl—a beautiful creature, with blue eyes and golden hair! They are carrying her away from her home! Ha! ha! Her home! Why, she has no home! Her home is in ruins! They are carrying her to a life worse than death! Ah! will no one save her?"

Her last words were uttered in a manner that causes the witnesses of the strange scene to shudder. Suddenly the white-haired starts forward with outstretched hand and pointing finger.

"See!" she gasps, hoarsely, with her left hand pressed to her bosom. "He is dead—the man I loved dearer than life—dead with a knife in his heart! Merciful Heaven! what a cruel blow to rob me of the one dearer than all the world! The man who struck the blow is at my side! He urges me to fly with him—he seizes me in his arms and bears me away! What is that? Fire! fire! the house—my home—is afire! I must go back and drag the body of my loved one from the fiendish flames! I must go back! The murderer is at my side—he will not let me go! He bears me away—away! Away from the burning home—away from the dead one in the crimson flames—away into the blackness of the night!"

For a moment the wild woman reeled as if about to fall; then she seemed to suddenly regain her strength; she points up the valley, crying:

"See! they are coming now! Fly, fly!"

The three men glance up the valley, but see no moving creature there. When they turn their eyes again to the spot where the white-haired woman stood, she is gone—has vanished completely! Jim and Harry remain in their tracks, but, with a smothered exclamation, Silent Seth springs toward the place where the woman was last seen. Into the shadows plunges the silent man and searches here and there, but finds no living creature.

"What was it?" gasped Montana Jim.

"It was evidently a female," replied Handy Harry, calmly. "And she had a tongue on her that could run as fast as the average woman's, you bet!"

When Silent Seth comes back from his search, he finds the old prospector nervously girding the saddle on his horse, while Harry is laughingly following his example.

"I take it that you did not find her, pard?" said the card-sharp, with a rising inflection.

"No."

"Well, you had better get your animal ready

for a move. Jim has decided to get out of here in short order. He is evidently started a little by the ravings of that crazy creature."

The old prospector muttered an angry exclamation.

"You don't want to insinuate that I'm er coward, young man," he growled.

"Nothing of the kind, old man."

"But I don't want ter hang roun' whar there's enny sech critters as thet we jest saw. I don't go much on witches or spooks."

"So you think that wild creature was a witch or a spook?"

"Pr'aps."

"A witch or spook is a hard thing to run away from."

"I reckon you heerd her warnin'?"

"So that is what you are going to move for, is it?"

"Thet is jest it."

"You put faith in that wild talk?"

"So much that I hain't goin' ter stay hyer no longer'n I hev ter."

"Hark!"

The warning came from Silent Seth's lips, and in an instant the quiet man's companions ceased speaking and listened, for they knew that Seth never spoke without good cause. Faintly, from far away up the valley, came the sound of horses' hoofs, the animals evidently being at a gallop.

"They are coming!" whispered Montana Jim.

"Let 'em come," said the card-sharp, coolly.

"We will get the horses up here into the shadow and they will go by without seeing us."

There was not much time for hesitation, and as Harry's suggestion seemed sensible, they quickly led the horses into the dark shadow and waited the coming of the unknown riders.

They had not long to wait, for soon the moonlight showed them five horsemen approaching at a slow gallop. On came the riders till they were opposite the place where our friends stood beside their horses in the deep shadows. They would have passed without suspecting the presence of any one but themselves, but suddenly Silent Seth's horse gave a loud neigh.

"Hold up a bit," cried the leader of the night riders, drawing rein.

CHAPTER III.

A CRY FOR HELP—OVER THE PRECIPICE.

THE five horsemen halted directly opposite the place where the fortune-seekers stood beside their saddled animals in the deepest shadows. As they did so, Montana Jim muttered a curse and stepped behind his horse, at the same time resting his Winchester across the saddle. His two companions quietly followed his example and then awaited developments.

"Did you hear it?" asked the leader of the nightriders.

"What?" came from several of the horsemen, in a breath.

"Ther whinny of a horse."

"I never heard a sound, boss," declared one, who carried a large bundle in his arms which slightly resembled a muffled human form.

"Jake wuz too attentive ter his fair charge ter notice ennythin'," laughs another.

"I am almost certain that I heard a hoss near at hand," asserted the leader. "Some of ther boys may be camped near here. It was in this vicinity that we were to meet them."

"It is possible, boss, but I don't see enny one."

"Nor I; yet I was certain that I was not mistaken. There are hosses near."

At this moment one of the horses of the fortune-hunters stamped impatiently, probably wishing to be away now that it was saddled and bridled.

"Ha!" exclaimed the leader of the unknown riders, as he leaned forward in the saddle and tried to pierce the shadows. "Did you hear that, men?"

Several acknowledged that they had.

"I think I can see hosses there in the shadow," declared the leader.

"An' whar there are hosses there are most allus owners," observed one of the men.

"Begobs!" exclaimed another, evidently a son of Erin. "And it may be the owners that we'll not care about sayin' at all, at all."

"You are right, Pat," admitted the one who appeared to be chief of the party. "Therefore you'll kindly ascertain if there are any owners connected with the hosses."

"An', faith, it's ascertain, is it now? If yees pl'aze, boss, I have a corn on the bottom of me fut which will prevint me fram ascertainin' wid any degray of comfort."

"Hang your corn! Ride your hoss inter ther shadders there and see if you can find anything. I think I can see some dark forms there."

"An' I think so meself! Ef yees pl'aze, this b'aste of mine is very tired."

"If you do not obey my order," said the chief, sternly, "you will be too tired to lug around ther lead which your carcass will contain."

"An' if I do be afther obeyin' yees, ther chances are tin ter wan that I am in the very same pridicament. Bard 'cess t' the luck! why wasn't I barn harnsum instid of onforchunate! It's the death of Patsey Mulligan this will be, I'm a-thinkin'!"

"Not if you keep away from this vicinity,

Patsey," came distinctly from the shadows. "My name is Handy Harry, my dear son of the Auld Country, and I have a way of fingerin' a gun as handily as I do the cards. If you don't wish for a dose out of my lead pill-dispenser, I advise you to keep at a distance."

"An' upon me soul, I'll be afther takin' hade t' that same p'ace of advise!" exclaimed the Irishman, as he slid from his horse, bringing the animal between himself and the man hidden by the shadows. "Pat Mulligan may be a coward, but the son-av-a-gun thit takes the likes of him for a fool will get left."

As for the other riders, they seemed amazed by the sound of the card-sharp's voice and for several moments not one of them stirred or spoke. The leader was the first to gain control of his tongue.

"Who is there?" he demanded, sharply.

"My dear sir," spoke the sport in the shadows, "did you fail to catch my name when I warbled a moment ago? I am Handy Harry the Hard Horse to Harness. I am a bad man with any kind of a deadly weapon, and those who see me call me a walking arsenal. What can I do for you in the way of business?"

"Drop that foolish talk and tell me what you are and what you want."

"With pleasure, dear sir. I am simply a wandering minstrel, slightly off his usual course of travel and possibly somewhat off his nut. Shall I sing you the Lay of the Last Galoot and accompany myself on the harp? A jewsharp is all I happen to have with me, but I don't suppose you will kick about such a little thing as that?"

"Are you a fool or a lunatic? Come out here where I can get a look at you."

"I am neither a fool nor a lunatic, which I shall prove by remaining where I am."

"Will some one go and bring that idiot out," commanded the leader of the night riders, rather than asked.

"If yees pl'aze," said the Irishman behind the horse, "I will sp'ake fer Patsey Mulligan. He is axin' t' bay excused."

No one stirred.

"Are you afraid of one man?" snarled the chief. "I will go and bring him out myself."

"You hed better stay rite whar ye are," cried Montana Jim, unable to restrain himself longer. "Ther fu'st galoot as moves this way I'll salt!"

A gasp of surprise came from the men in the moonlight, for they had thought that the shadows only hid one man. Now they know that one is not the limit. How many are there? For several moments not a word is spoken. Handy Harry breaks the silence with a laugh.

"Why don't you come and take a look at me demanded, scornfully. "I am here, jewsharp and all."

"You are not alone?"

"Well, hardly. However, my friends do not outnumber your crowd more than two to one, so if you want me, just come and get me. We will try to make it pleasant for you."

"Who are you and what do you want here?" the leader of the horsemen again demanded.

"We are honest men an' want ter be let erlone," was Jim's reply.

Before another of the men can speak, a startling thing occurred. From the bundle which one of the night riders held in his arms came a cry of distress—the muffled cry of a woman!

"Help! Save me for the love of heaven! Help, help!"

Of course the three men concealed by the shadows were amazed, but the leader of the night riders was both dismayed and disgusted. A bitter imprecation broke from his lips as he heard that muffled call for help, and, half-turning in the saddle so that he faced the man who held the singular bundle in his arms, he snarled:

"Curse it, Jake! what are you about? Didn't I tell you to keep her still?"

To which the man addressed made no reply, but drew the heavy folds of cloth closer about the form in his arms.

Handy Harry was excited in an instant.

"By the gods!" he fairly hissed. "There is something foul there! Did you hear that cry, pards?"

"Yes," replied both of his companions, in a breath.

"What do you think?" demanded the aroused card-sharp.

"It wuz er feemale," replied the old prospector.

"You are right, and she has called to us for aid. Tracy Harrison never goes back on a woman in distress. Those men are villains and kidnappers! We must help that woman."

"Then to work!" came crisply from Seth's lips. "They move!"

He was right; the strange horsemen were already moving away.

"Halt!" rung sharp and clear from Handy Harry's lips. "Hold up there! Our business with you is not yet finished."

The leader turned his head to fling over his shoulder:

"Our business with you is quite completed. Good-night, pleasant dreams."

"Stop, you measly whelps!" roared Montana Jim. "Chain up, or we'll fill ye full o' lead."

The answer was a mocking laugh, as the night riders urged their horses into a gallop and dashed away from the valley. The old prospector raved like a madman, but Harry's sharp words brought him to his senses.

"Mount, mount!" cried the gambler. "They are getting away! We must give them chase."

As if moved by one common impulse, the three vaulted into the saddle, and a moment later were in full pursuit of the unknown kidnappers of the Big Horn Mountains. It promised to be a stirring race away through the moonlight and the shadows.

"They know the ground, and have the advantage of us in that respect," came from the card-sharp's lips, as he endeavored to urge his horse to a swifter pace. "We will give them a hard chase for all of that. If it were not that our horses are pretty well used up by the long jaunt they have had."

"But their critters acted tired, too," observed Jim. "As you say, we will give them a hard chase."

The silent man said not a word, but kept his eyes turned straight ahead where ever and anon he could see dark forms dash from the shadows through the moonlight. If they overtook the fleeing men, he would do his part, there was no doubt concerning that.

"That wild woman spoke the truth when she said that there were horsemen coming," Handy Harry finally confessed. "It cannot be that she heard them when she pretended to be listening, yet, unless she did, it is a mystery how she could tell what she did."

"Pard Harry," came soberly from the old prospector's lips, "it is a mystery ennyhow ye putt it, fer how did that critter know that them galoots hed er feemle woman with them?"

"I'll give it up."

"Pr'aps you are not ser sart'in now that she wuz not a witch or a spook?"

"I believe in neither witches or spooks."

"Waal, I believe in both, fer I know that sech critters do exist."

"You are superstitious, old man."

"Don't fling enny big dict'onary words at me, pard. W'at I knows I knows."

"Well, I know that we will not overtake those rascals if we don't get up more steam. We must push the horses harder."

"They are doin' their level best."

Jim spoke the truth, for the jaded creatures could not be urged to a faster pace. They were doing their best, and neither hand, voice or spur seemed to make any impression on them.

"We are holding our own," asserted Harry.

This the veteran fortune-seeker admitted, but he added:

"We want ter do more than hole our own, we want ter gain on 'em. Ef we don't do that, they'll probably fine a chance ter guv us ther slip."

He was right; such an opportunity was just what the fleeing men were looking for. Finally they turned from the valley and plunged into a narrow and dark ravine. The pursuers did not hesitate about following, although old Jim said:

"Look out fer snags now, pards. They may ambush us heer in ther darkness. Hev yer weppins reddey fer use."

Without a word in reply, his companions gave heed to the warning, and each holding a revolver in his right hand, the three daring fellows went onward through the shadows.

They were not ambushed, and when they finally emerged again into the moonlight, they discovered the strange horsemen only a short distance ahead. Almost instantly Silent Seth made a discovery.

"One gone," he said, curtly.

He was right. There were now only four horsemen in advance instead of five, the original number.

"Tricked!" hissed the card-sharp, madly. "The one who carried the woman and the woman herself are gone!"

"Tornaders an' tom-cats!" came savagely from the old prospector. "You are right! We hev bin beaten."

At this moment, as if they had heard the words of their pursuers, the strange night riders gave several shrill yells of derision and defiance; then, with little difficulty, they urged their horses forward faster.

"We are sold!" disgustedly declared the sport, drawing rein. "We may as well give up the chase."

The others drew up, and Montana Jim relieved his feelings by swearing in a manner far from mild.

"It's er cussid shame!" he growled. "Howsumever, I don't s'pose swearin' will help it enny. I'd jest like ter git at them durned gal-stealers."

"No more than would I. But, what is to be done now?"

"Go back an' hunt fer ther t'other critter an' ther feemle."

"It is not likely that we shall find them."

"No; but we can't do no wuss'n not ter hunt."

"You are right. Let's go back down the ravine."

Then the three turned back into the darkness.

It was a fruitless search and daylight found them camped miles from the little valley in which they had halted at dark a few hours before, and it is probable that three more angry and disgusted men could not have been found in all the Territory. Over and over they discussed the singular adventures of the night, but the more they talked about it the greater became their perplexity and disgust.

Who were the night riders? Who was the female in their power that had cried out for help? Who was the mysterious wild woman that had warned the fortune-seekers that the horsemen were coming down the valley?

To the first question alone could they agree upon any satisfactory answer. The unknown horsemen were probably kidnappers and outlaws. It was said that a band of desperadoes who were hand and glove with the red-skins had their retreat somewhere amid the wilds of the Big Horn Range, and it seemed likely that the night riders were of that dastardly organization.

When they had eaten a scanty breakfast, Montana Jim arose and, picking up his rifle, announced his intention of going out to reconnoiter the surroundings.

"I'm goin' up thar, somewhere," he said, waving his hand toward the heights at their left. "I want ter git er peek at ther kentry afore we make another move."

An hour later he was skirting the brink of a precipice far up the side of one of the mountains. To his left was a perpendicular descent into a small wooded gorge that ran along the mountain. As he trod along the brink, the thought flashed through his veteran's mind that it would mean almost certain death to fall over the verge.

Barely had this thought passed through his mind when he suddenly found himself face to face with a powerful-looking, painted red-skin who seemed to have been waiting for him. In a moment with a yell of triumph, the Indian sprang upon the pale-face. Taken by surprise, Jim dropped his rifle and reached for a knife; but the warrior was on the outlook for such a move and thwarted it, at the same time making desperate endeavors to hurl the prospector over the precipice.

"No ye don't, consarn ye!" gritted Jim. "I'm ernuff fer ye, if ye did ketch me w'en I wassent lookin' fer ye. I've handled wuss bucks'n you be in my day. Now I w'u'dn't do thet—I really w'u'dn't!"

Failing in his attempt to hurl the white over the brink, the Sioux had tried to use his knife, but Jim had promptly caught his wrist and baffled the endeavor.

"You'd orter tried thet fu'st," came from the old prospector.

At times they tottered on the very verge of the precipice and it seemed that they must go over together; then they would reel back against the solid wall of rock. The Indian's lips were tightly pressed together and in the dark depths of his gleaming eyes shone a deadly resolve.

It was a fight to the death!

The red-man had an advantage at the start and he did his best to hold it. In this he was successful, for soon the white began to breathe hard from the terrible exertion of holding that gleaming knife at bay. It looked as if Montana Jim's minutes were numbered.

Once more they reeled forward to the verge of the precipice. As they hung there for a moment, the report of a rifle rung out in the gorge below. A death-groan of agony came from the Indian's lips, and, making a desperate attempt to carry the white man with him, he plunged forward over the precipice.

At the last moment, Montana Jim had broken the death-stricken red-skin's hold, but he was scarcely quick enough to save himself. For several seconds he hung upon the verge, wildly swinging his arms in a vain attempt to regain his equilibrium, then, with a gasp of horror, he followed his red foe down to—what?

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN NAMELESS BLOCKS THE WAY.

"WHICH way, Max?"

"I don't know; I am at a loss to decide."

The first speaker was a tall, handsome young fellow of twenty-three or four. His companion was several years younger, and was much stouter, but hardly as good-looking. Both of the young men were well tanned by exposure.

Their names were Victor Leclair and Max Burke.

They were dressed much alike in stout, serviceable woolen clothes, wide-brimmed hats and long-legged boots. Each wore a belt of weapons about his waist and had a rifle slung at his back. They were mounted on stout, yet fleet-appearing horses and seemed prepared for a long and dangerous journey through a wild country. That they had already traveled many a league was apparent from the appearance of the animals and their masters. The beard on the faces of the young men had not been touched by razor for a moon, at least.

Victor Leclair had the air of a gentleman bred and born, and was in truth the possessor of an excellent education, having passed through

one of the leading colleges of the country to graduate with honor, and afterward to fit himself for the practice of law. In looking for the best opening for a young man of his profession, he turned his eyes toward the West, and finally drifted to Montana. What he then considered a great misfortune, but afterward thought a most fortunate thing, was his falling sick in the home of David Burke, an eccentric old rancher who lived with his wife and two children—a son and daughter—within seventy miles of Bozeman.

That such a handsome, wild, bewitching, yet ladylike and charming, girl as Viona Burke should be found in such a place was a great wonder to Victor, and when by her gentle care she had nursed him back to health and strength, he discovered that he had lost his heart and was wildly in love with the idol of old Dave Burke's home.

Max Burke was in almost every way unlike his petite blue-eyed sister. Max was a heavy, broad-shouldered, muscular young fellow, whose face, though far from handsome, was very resolute and manly in appearance. Max had the body of a young gladiator, and his well-poised head was set upon a round muscular neck that was simply perfect in its contour. His hands, although large, were shapely and handsome, but there was something about them that was strongly suggestive of a grip of steel. In the depths of his large gray eyes lurked a look of general good nature, but Victor Leclair had seen those eyes gleam with a look of fiercest rage—deadliest determination. All told, young Burke was a noble-hearted fellow who would be a friend firm and unswerving, and who could be an enemy to be dreaded and shunned. For those he loved he would pass through fire and flood; he might not dare so much to get at those he hated, but if his enemies knew when they were safe, they were careful not to cross his path.

But, how came it that these two young men were in the wilds of the Big Horn Mountains so far from the home of the Burkes? Perhaps their conversation will tell us.

"I know not which way to move," declared Max, in perplexity, as he glanced down the diverging canyons on either hand. "And still, I don't know as it makes much difference which way we go. We are quite off the trail of the wretches and we may be going in the wrong direction if we take either course."

"And at the same time," observed the young lawyer, "everything may depend upon our choice. One of the ways open to us may lead us to the men we are searching for."

"Yes, may lead us to Viona and vengeance! Oh, so much may depend upon the choice!"

"I am for turning to the right."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell, but something seems to draw me that way."

"And I have thought that the best course. We will turn to the right and go on into the heart of the mountains."

"We shall find the one for whom we are seeking there. I am sure of it!"

"I am seeking for more than one," came savagely from Max Burke's lips. "I am am not only hunting for the kidnappers of my sister, but I am looking for the destroyer of our home—the dastardly murderer of my poor old mother! I am on the trail of vengeance, and a just God will not permit the bloody-handed assassins to escape the punishment which is justly their due!"

"I think you are right, Max," said Victor, soberly. "The All-ruling One will not let us fail in our purpose. Come on!"

Then they rode down into the canyon on the hunt for the murderers of an old woman and the kidnappers of a beautiful girl. For a long time they rode along in silence, Max with bowed head and deeply knitted brow. Finally, Victor reached out and touched the arm of his moody companion.

"Max."

"The young man aroused himself with a start."

"What is it, Vic?"

"Do you think it possible that we have made a mistake—that we are far from the course that we are out to pursue to overtake the marauders?"

A look of pain contorted the features of the younger man for a moment as if the very thought was maddening. He did not immediately reply, and when he did speak, the words seemed to come with an effort:

"It is possible, Victor. We succeeded in tracking wretches to these mountains, then we lost the trail. Since then we have been moving by instinct and may be widely away from the course that we ought to have followed. But we will hope for the best. The marauders were aiming—or seemed to be—for the heart of the mountains. Heaven grant that we may find them there!"

"Amen!" came solemnly from Victor's lips.

"I am burning with impatience. Since the hour that, with my poor, broken-hearted father by my side, I swore above the body of my dead mother to know no rest till my sister was rescued, and the murder of the one who gave me life was avenged, my blood has been seething in my veins. I am not the jolly, indifferent fellow that I was before the crime—I know it. When I see the man of the coal-black beard and the fingerless left hand lying dead at my feet

and know that my sister is safe, then I may become myself once more."

"That moment will surely come. The guilty wretch shall not escape."

"Heaven grant that you speak the truth!"

"Max, when we rode away from your home that day, bound for Bozeman, whither I had urged you to go with me, we little thought what a sight would greet our eyes on our return."

"My God, no! Had I dreamed, I would not have left my dear mother's side for an instant. I did not think of danger. Had I— But that is past, and it is worse than useless to think of it now."

"And I—I was to blame for it all. But for me, you would not have gone."

"Stop, Victor! You are in no way to blame, so do not heap reproaches on yourself. You knew not what a terrible thing was impending. It was fated that it should be so. I know that you have felt this terrible calamity that has befallen upon me, for your kind words and sympathy have done much to aid me in bearing up. You were with me when I found my grief-shattered father holding his wife's dead body in his arms as he sat upon the ground and stared with dry and sightless eyes at the smoking ruins of what had once been a happy home. You heard his story of how the dastardly wretches tore my sister from his arms, and when my mother sprung toward her child with outstretched arms, struck the agonized woman down—struck the blow that caused her death! You heard the old man's faltering story, Victor Leclair, and you heard me swear above my mother's dead body to rescue Viona and wreak vengeance upon the murderer. You helped me bury my mother, and you went with me when I carried my broken-hearted father to Cutler's Ranch. Then, at my side, you followed the trail of the red-handed kidnappers. I have not forgotten these things, my friend."

"But you know that I have an object in following those ruffians. You know that—"

"You are in love with my sister—yes. I suspected as much before you were able to walk around the house after your sickness. I read your secret in your eyes, and it was with dismay that I detected a similar secret in the eyes of my sister. I did not know you then as I seem to since this terrible calamity, and I trembled with fear. You were a polished gentleman; Viona is a child of the plains. But there is not a nobler girl or a greater lady in all the land. It is true she did not have the best educational advantages, but father sent her to a young ladies' school as long as he could afford. She did not give up her studies when she came home; then she took me in hand and made me what I am—God bless her blue eyes! She is good enough for the best man that ever breathed!"

"You are right; she is all that you claim. If those wretches dare to harm her—"

"If they dare to harm her, I will have their hearts' blood! But, something tells me that she will be restored to us unharmed. I feel within my heart that we shall find her before long."

"Heaven knows I hope you are right! I would go through fire and water for a look from her dear eyes!"

As the young men talked they rode steadily on down the canyon. The ground was comparatively unbroken and they encountered no obstacles for a time. But they were yet to encounter an obstacle of an unexpected nature.

Suddenly up in their path arose a masked man wearing a blue coat which was figured with gold cord and ornamented with a double row of brass buttons. His pants were tucked into the legs of a pair of very high boots on the heels of which were silver spurs. A bluish-colored sombrero was set rakishly on one side of his head, and at the ends of the slender gold chain which encircled it were two tiny yellow bells.

The figure of the masked man was very straight and seemed decidedly commanding as he threw up one hand with a gesture that could not be mistaken. Instantly the two horsemen drew rein.

"You cannot go any further in this direction, gentlemen," declared the wearer of the blue coat and mask, in a singularly clear, distinct tone.

The young men were amazed.

"What do you mean?" demanded Max.

"Just what I said," was the quiet retort.

"You cannot go any further in this direction, therefore you may as well right about face."

"This is an outrage!" cried Victor.

"You may look at it in that light if you choose. I shall not dispute with you."

"And who are you who pretends to block the mountain passes?" asked Max, with unconcealed scorn.

The mask bowed as he replied:

"I am called Captain Nameless, and I am the chief of the Blue Coats of the Big Horn Range!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BLUE COATS TO THE RESCUE.

"THE Blue Coats—who are they?"

Max asked the question, doing his best to restrain his impatience and anger.

"They are the followers of Captain Name-

less," answered the strange man, and it seemed to the two young men that he was laughing at them behind the mask which entirely concealed his face from forehead to throat.

"A band of outlaws, I'll bet my head!" muttered the young lawyer beneath his breath.

"Stand aside and let us pass," commanded Max, laying a hand threateningly on a revolver.

The wearer of the mask did not stir from his tracks, nor did he attempt to touch a weapon. He simply said in the quietest manner imaginable:

"I advise you to leave that toy alone, young man. You will surely regret it if you draw."

The old rancher's son hesitated. There was something about the calm, confident air of the strange man that seemed decidedly ominous.

"What right have you to stand in our way?" Max finally demanded.

"The right of might."

"A very poor right, to say the least. But, we do not want to turn back, and we refuse to be put to so much trouble by a man who hides his face behind a mask. Again I say, stand aside!"

"And again I say go slow! You will get into trouble if you crowd Captain Nameless."

"Bah! We will take our chances. Come on, Vic."

With these words, Max touched his horse with the spur and started forward. Only to halt with an exclamation of anger and surprise, as he saw six blue-coated forms arise from behind the boulders at either side of the canyon and cover the young men with as many cocked rifles. The face of every man was covered by a mask like that of Captain Nameless, but, unlike him, the yellow cord and golden chain did not adorn their coats and wide-brimmed hats.

"You will observe," came calmly from the leader of the Blue Coats, "that I hold the winning cards. It means certain death to try to pass those men."

For several moments both of the young men were silent with surprise and dismay. Finally, Victor's face flushed with rage.

"This is infamous!" he cried.

"Do you think so?" bowed the figure, in yellow and blue. "It is your privilege, and I shall not dispute you."

"But, what reason have you for refusing to allow us to pass?"

"That is my secret."

"At least you ought to express some reason. You should give us that much satisfaction."

"I deny your right to question my motives," was the coldly uttered rejoinder.

Then Max broke forth in anger:

"It is useless to talk with him, Victor. A man who is ashamed of his face and hides it behind a mask would be ashamed of his motives. There is nothing for us to do but retrace our steps."

"Your last sentence shows that you are not quite devoid of judgment, as I had feared," said Captain Nameless, grimly. "You have named the only course that you can pursue. Before you go, permit me to tell you that you will have to keep your eyes wide open if you wish to ramble around amid these mountains and retain your scalps. If we had been red-skins instead of white men, you both would be reeking in your gore at this moment."

But neither of the young men paid the least attention to this strange man's warning. Silently they turned their horses and rode back along the canyon.

"Good-day, gentlemen," called the chief of the Blue Coats.

Neither of them turned their heads or made any reply; and so in silence they rode out of sight.

"What do you think of that?" asked Victor, when they were beyond sight and hearing of the blue-coated figures.

"Think of it? You heard me express my opinion pretty plainly back there. I have not changed my mind."

"As I did mine. But who are these men?"

"Lawbreakers—outlaws, of course."

"I believe you are right. That is what they must be. But why did they refuse to allow us to go on down the canyon?"

"That is not so easily answered. I fancy we were getting too near to their retreat. If we had gone further, we might have discovered something which they did not want known."

"That seems reasonable, and if they are outlaws, is it not possible they are connected with the ones for whom we are searching?"

"I have thought of that, and am inclined to believe it probable. Victor, we are near the end of the trail!"

"I believe it, Max."

"We will not go far from this vicinity. We will go back and turn down the other branch of the canyon. Possibly we may find something that will interest us there."

At the forks they halted and gave their horses and themselves a breathing spell. From a little spring they slaked their own thirst, then allowed the animals to drink. For nearly an hour they rested, discussing their recent adventure and trying to decide on the best course to pursue. Finally they agreed that the next thing in

order would be to explore the other branch of the canyon; so, mounting their horses, they rode slowly down the narrow gorge.

Still earnestly discussing the unexpected events of the day, they paid little heed to their surroundings or to the flight of time. Away down the canyon they rode straight into a trap of which they did not dream.

Suddenly a wild yell echoed along the canyon and the rocks on either side seemed to give birth to a dozen dusky forms. In an instant they were surrounded by a band of Sioux warriors!

Although taken by surprise, the young men instantly jerked forth their revolvers. Max was conversant with the weapons and a dead shot with either hand. In an instant he dropped the bridle rein upon the neck of his horse and began working his self-cocking revolvers with either hand. Victor's motions were not so swift, and he only drew one revolver. In his excitement, he wasted his first shots.

Evidently the Indian had expected to take the young men so by surprise that they would have no chance or thought of resistance. If this was their intention, they made a great mistake, for before one of the red warriors could touch Max Burke he had dropped two of them. As one of the reds grasped the bridle of his horse, Victor fired with the muzzle of his revolver not a foot from the doomed Indian's head, sending him to the earth in a heap.

"Give it to 'em, Vic!" shouted Max, as he worked his weapons. "It is a fight for life!"

The Indians, apparently, were determined to take the two young men alive, and certain it is that they would have succeeded had not aid arrived from a most unexpected source. Just as it seemed that the young rancher and the lawyer would be torn from their horses, by the infuriated warriors, a band of blue-coated horsemen swept around a bend in the canyon and joined in the fight. At first our friends thought that a squadron of cavalry had come to their aid, but they quickly discovered that the new actors in the tragedy were Captain Nameless and his men!

After the appearance of the Blue Coats the battle was remarkably brief, for at the sight of their new foes, the Indians turned and fled, seeming to vanish and be swallowed up by the rocks in a twinkling. Only one red-skin fell after reaching the cover of the rocks, and Captain Nameless dropped him with a snap shot as he was trying to leap from one place of cover to another. It was singular how the red Bedouins made the bare-looking rocks cover their retreat and succeeded in getting away without greater loss.

When Captain Nameless had dropped the fleeing red he turned to the young men whom he had befriended and found Victor staring at him in undisguised amazement while Max was coolly reloading the chamber of his revolver.

"It seems that we happened along just in time, young gentlemen," remarked the captain of the Blue Coats, quietly inspecting his revolvers to discover how many charges he had fired. "The red devils had you in a very close corner and you would have been their captives in a few seconds more. It cannot be that you heeded my warning very closely."

Neither of the young men made a reply. Victor was too puzzled to say anything just then, and Max, having finished reloading his weapons, was regarding the masked man critically. Now that the battle was ended, the blue-coated horsemen were sitting quietly on their horses, awaiting the motion of their chief as they reloaded their weapons.

Captain Nameless made an impatient motion when the ones he addressed failed to answer his somewhat questioning words.

"I do not believe that you have lost your tongues, young gentlemen," he said, with a sarcastic ring to his voice. "At the same time you seem incapable of speech."

By this time Victor had regained his scattered wits.

"If you are waiting for us to thank you for your service to—"

Again the mysterious man made that swift, impatient gesture, interrupting the speaker with:

"I am waiting for nothing of the kind. I ask no thanks for what service we rendered you. I struck at the reds not so much on your account as because of my natural antipathy for the blood-thirsty fiends. It gives me pleasure to baffle and destroy them whenever I can. No, keep your thanks for one who appreciates them."

More than before was Victor puzzled at the singular manner of this strange man who concealed his face behind a mask. Who and what was he?

After gazing through the eye-holes of his mask a few moments in silence, seeming to regard the two young men whom he had befriended most unexpectedly with searching eyes, the man of mystery spoke slowly and earnestly:

"I warned you to keep your eyes open if you wished to retain your scalps. It is plain that you did not pay much heed to my words, but I am going to repeat them. I know not what brings you into this dangerous country, but if you ever wish to get out alive, you must be constantly on the alert. You will find red and

white foes very thick among these mountains. That is all. You may go on now."

For a moment the young men hesitated, and catching their eyes turned toward the dead reds, the chief of the mysterious men said:

"Their friends will take care of them. If not, let the carcasses become food for wolves and vultures. Go!"

And without a word Max and Victor rode away.

It was more than thirty minutes later when the young lawyer turned to his companion with the question:

"Well, Max, what do you think?"

"I know not what to think," acknowledged the old rancher's son. "I am completely puzzled. That man is an enigma. I did not think that they would allow us to continue down the canyon, but he did not oppose it in the least."

"It is fortunate for us that Captain Nameless and his men came to our assistance just as they did."

"Yes, it was a great piece of good fortune, for in a few moments more the red fiends would have overpowered us. We are indebted to the strange man of the Big Horn Mountains for our lives without a doubt."

"It is possible that we were mistaken in thinking him an outlaw."

"Yes, it is possible; but why should an honest man hide his face behind a mask like a highwayman? That is a question for you."

"And one that I cannot answer. I am completely at sea."

"I am in the same helpless situation, but I have begun to believe that we will not find Viona in Captain Nameless' hands. We are not at the end of the trail."

For a long time they rode along in silence, busy with their thoughts, but keeping a sharp outlook for danger now that their narrow escape had taught them caution. At length the young lawyer touched his comrade's arm.

"I say, Max."

"What?"

"We have not seen the last of Captain Nameless."

"You are right; we shall see him again."

The afternoon passed without further adventure, and that night they halted in a secluded glen in the depths of a snug little mountain pocket. They made a scanty meal on such food as they found in their saddle-bags and satisfied their thirst from a little spring that bubbled from beneath some rocks. When they had attended to their horses, they threw themselves down upon their blankets and lay talking in low tones and gazing into the deepening darkness. No need to tell the drift of their conversation. It was of the strange adventures of the day and of Captain Nameless, the mysterious chief of the Blue Coats.

For nearly two hours they lay thus, discussing the things which troubled and perplexed them, but at the end of that time they had not arrived at any satisfactory conclusion. Finally, they ceased talking and lay gazing into the gloom, thinking, thinking. And while they lay thus, without intending to do so, they both fell asleep.

At least four hours had passed and the moon had arisen and was sending a flood of light down into the little glen where lay the two unconscious figures, when suddenly Max Burke started up, having felt a light touch upon his arm. A gasp of amazement came from his lips as the moonlight revealed a figure bending over him—the figure of a beautiful young girl!

CHAPTER VI.

A RACE FOR LIFE—THE STRANGE PRESERVER.

PURSUED by more than a dozen Sioux warriors who were thirsting for his blood, a small, supple-appearing white man was running swiftly along a narrow ridge amid the Big Horn Mountains. From the appearance of pursued and pursuers, the race had already been a long and severe one. The white was breathing heavily as he ran—almost panting—and there was a grim look of despair on his bearded face. Evidently he considered his position a desperate one, and well he might!

The fugitive was dressed in the buckskin garments of a border ranger scout, and during all the race he had held fast to his handsome Winchester repeating-rifle, probably thinking that it might be of use to him when he was forced to turn at bay. Although a small man, he seemed finely formed, and was apparently capable of great physical endurance and fatigue. A part of his features were concealed by a short-cropped, sandy beard, but his eyes were keen and piercing, and his general look was that of a shrewd, intelligent man.

As he dashed along the ridge, he noted that the yells of the pursuing reds had a strangely triumphant ring, and he began to suspect that they felt sure of their prey.

"Thar's menny er slip atwixt ther neck o' er quart flask an' ther lips o' er thirsty man," he muttered, grimly, as he cast a swift look over his shoulder. "Yell, yell, yell, ye pesky varmints! ye hain't got yer han's onter Leetle Rocks yit. I'll give more nor one o' ye yer last fit o' sickness afore ye do!" he added, savagely. "Ole Drap'em hyer's good fer ther hull crowd

o' ye if I c'u'd git whar I c'u'd wuck it. Anyhow, you've got ter ketch me afore ye lift my skulp."

This thought seemed to cause him some satisfaction, for he smiled strangely as he dashed along. He was the kind of a man who could smile in the face of death, and would die easier did he know that he had dealt fatal blows among his foes. He was a brave man who had faced death more than once, and had not shrunk from the grim monster's presence; he was a man well fitted for the perilous life of a scout.

"They whoop ez though they war sart'in of me," came slowly from his lips, as he glanced anxiously ahead. "I've bin wonderin' how this blamed hog's back would wind up, an' I reckon as how p'r'aps I'll fine merself in er durned preedickymint w'en I cum ter ther eend. Waal, I'll never give up till I'm cornered an' downed so thet I can't pull trigger or wuck a knife. Shucks! I'll fine er way ter slip 'em yit!"

But that was much easier said than done—a fact which the little scout realized. The Sioux bucks would stick to the trail like so many bloodhounds. If he escaped at all, he would probably have to find a chance to hold them at bay while he lay in a place of comparative safety. He thought of this, and his sharp eyes were on the outlook for such a place, but thus far he had failed to find the spot that he desired.

"I must fine it by an' by, fer ef I don't, my goose'll be cooked. It means life or death with you this time, Rube Rocks. You hev pulled through some mighty tuff places, an' now you've got ter pull through another—or go under!"

On, on ran the hunted man, and steadily in pursuit came the determined warriors, seeming to feel certain of their prey for some reason. The little scout was soon to learn what that reason was.

Suddenly the fugitive uttered a cry of dismay. He had discovered why the reds seemed so sure of their game.

A short distance the ridge was broken by a wide fissure!

"Trapped!" came hoarsely from the unfortunate man's lips. "I cannot jump that break—I am fairly caught! Ha! there are some rocks! I will get behind them an' fight to the death! Ther red cusses will find thet Little Rocks dies hard!"

Straight for the rocks he bounded, then a most unlucky thing occurred. As he glanced over his shoulder to ascertain how near his red foes were, he caught his foot and went down, striking his head against a large stone with such violence that he was stunned for the time. His rifle flew from his grasp and fell several feet away.

Wild yells of delight came from the lips of the red pursuers as they witnessed this downfall, and they redoubled their exertions to reach the unfortunate scout, who lay quite still, making no attempt to rise. It looked as if Little Rocks's moments were numbered—it seemed that his scalp was destined to hang in a Sioux wig-wam.

Until the yelling Indians were almost upon him the fallen man did not stir. Then, when they were within a rod of him, he struggled up on one knee and whipped out his revolvers. An instant later a shot rung out, and with a death yell, the foremost red-skin threw up his hands and fell upon his face so near that he almost touched the kneeling white. Another shot followed and another warrior gave vent to a howl of pain. Then they closed in on the apparently doomed man and the struggle became hand-to-hand.

But, the scout was not destined to lose his scalp that day.

A sudden wild, piercing yell that would have done credit to a steam whistle electrified the struggling mass. An instant later a wild, terrible-appearing figure sprang into the midst of the fray, hurling the warriors to the right and left as if they had been children, repeating the first thrilling cry occasionally and snarling and snapping like a wild beast all the while.

The effect of this unexpected interruption was almost magical. In less than ten seconds the fight was ended, and the little scout stood staring in undisguised amazement at the grotesque, horrible-appearing figure that had so strangely sprung between him and the keen knives of his red foes. The Indians—a few moments before so fierce for the blood of the pale-face—were also gazing at the preserver of their foe in evident terror and dismay.

And well they might.

A figure bent and misshapen, with a large bunch between the shoulders—a form that had apparently been straight and handsome at one time, but was now an unpleasant sight to behold. Scarred and misshapen hands, with long fingers that made the beholder think of the talons of a hawk. But the face—that was what held the eye of the beholder riveted with horror. Twisted, scarred and distorted till it scarcely resembled a human face, it took but a glance to tell the cause of the horrible deformity—fire! At some time the being's face had been burned and lacerated till it was a wonder that he had not died from the effects of what he must have suffered. A matted mass of hair hung

down over the forehead, and from the depths gleamed two sharp eyes. The strange being wore no hat upon his head.

Facing the red-skins, the terrible creature continued to snarl and growl after the struggle was entirely over. His fingers worked convulsively as if they longed to seize upon the cowering warriors and rend them.

"Ah-a!" came through the set teeth of the wild-appearing man. "The devil is holding a jubilee! He has a feast, and his wine-cups were to be filled with human blood! Ug-ga-rr! The blood of the pale-face was to fill the devil's wine-cups, but he will be disappointed to-day—Scar-Face will disappoint the foul fiend this time! Ah-a!"

The Indians recoiled a few steps as these words came hissing from the lips of the being who had thwarted them.

"A madman!" was the scout's mental decision. "He must have been crouching behind the rocks for which I was making."

Suddenly the deformed singled out a warrior with his index finger.

"Crooked Eye."

The one addressed took one hesitating step forward and then paused.

"Are you the leader of this party of hell-birds?"

"These warriors obey Crooked Eye," was the distinct reply, spoken in good English.

"Then take them away," was the stern command, as the deformed wiped the foam from his lips with his hand. "The Great Spirit has said that the white shall not die to-day. Do you hear?" fiercely stamping one foot and extending a claw-like hand. "Take them away!"

Crooked Eye hesitated.

"The pale-face has slain two warriors," he finally faltered.

A howl of fury came from the lips of the scar-faced creature and he seemed on the point of launching himself at the chief's throat. For a moment the two glared into each other's eyes, then the red-skin bowed his head. Scar-Face had conquered.

"Go!" and he pointed one crooked finger back along the ridge. "Dare to disobey, and I will call down the wrath of the Great Spirit on your head! Go, I say!"

Without another word, the disappointed and angry red chief turned away, followed by his warriors, who only paused to lift the forms of the two whom the little white had slain.

Little Rocks gazed at his singular preserver in increasing amazement and awe. He could not understand the power which the deformed creature seemed to possess.

The man of the scarred face stood watching the retreating red-skins, seeming unaware of the presence of the pale-face whose life he had saved. How long he would have stood thus cannot be told, but finally Rocks ventured to address him:

"Stranger," began the little scout, falteringly

"I have to thank ye fer my life. I reckon—"

But there he stopped, for the deformed had turned upon him the two sharp eyes that gleamed from behind the tangled mass of hair.

"What did you say?"

Little Rocks was surprised, for the question was asked in a tone of voice that was pleasant—almost musical! With sudden courage, he repeated:

"Allow me ter thank ye fer savin' me from them red cusses. But fer you—"

"Curse your thanks!" suddenly snarled the singular creature. "What do I want of your thanks! I don't know why I saved you from those fiends, but you are saved. Don't thank me! Get your rifle and follow me."

Wonderingly the scout obeyed. The wild man led him to the end of the ridge and pointed downward.

"If you are sure-footed, you can get down there," he said. "That is the only way for you, for the red devils will be waiting for you back along the ridge. Don't dally to make any talk, for I don't want to hear it. I am Scar-Face, the Mountain Monarch, and I have cheated the devil out of his draught of blood to-day. Don't tell any one that I said so, but the devil hates me with an undying hatred. I have cheated him out of many a drink! Go!"

Without a word, Little Rocks swung his rifle at his back and began the descent.

CHAPTER VII.

A DARING MAN'S WORK.

THAT night the little scout fell asleep in a grove of cottonwoods far from the scene of his singular adventure and narrow escape from death. He had puzzled his brain not a little concerning the strange man who had saved him from the bloodthirsty reds, and had finally come to the conclusion that he was simply a madman whose words were meaningless and whose movements were controlled by a disordered brain. The secret of the creature's power over the Indians he could not fathom unless they knew that Scar-Face's mind had "been touched by the finger of the Great Spirit" and feared him for that reason.

Little Rocks was tired and quickly was asleep after creeping into the darkest part of the cottonwood grove. He was a light sleeper and knew

that any strange sound would arouse him. Being a man who carried his life in his hands and was almost constantly surrounded by peril, he had acquired what appeared to be an ability to scent danger in the air whether awake or asleep. Many a time while sleeping in an Indian infested country had he suddenly awoke without knowing what had aroused him, but with a strange foreboding of danger, and not once had he been deceived. To this singular instinct or intuition he trusted his life when he fell asleep in the cottonwoods.

Midnight came and the moon crept up into the sky to flood with mellow light the peaks, the valleys, and even penetrate some of the canyons. Higher and higher rose the moon and silently the night slipped away while the little scout lay sleeping soundly in the cottonwoods. The bark of a distant wolf, the mournful cry of some strange animal on a far-away mountain-side or the soft sound of the wind amid the trees did not disturb him. A bar of moonlight crept down through the branches and fell upon the upturned face of the sleeper, but still his slumber was unbroken. Another day was approaching.

Suddenly the scout awoke. He knew not what had aroused him, but he felt sure that his slumbers had not been broken without cause, therefore he lay still, grasping his weapons and listening. At first he heard nothing, but after a few moments he detected a sound like the far-away tread of horses' feet. Placing his ear to the ground, he held his breath and listened. Yes, he was not mistaken; he had heard a sound.

"Hosses!" flashed through his mind. "Thar are several o' 'em—five or six, if not more. They are cumin' this way! Who kin be abroad in ther Big Horn at this time o' night? This matter will bear investigatin'."

Once more he listened to assure himself that the horses were really approaching and discovered that there was no doubt of it. They were much nearer than when he had heard them at first.

"Ef I keep still, they may cum ter me," reasoned the little pale-face. "They are comin' nearer, and nearer. Every hoss has a rider. Are they red or white? The chances are thet they are red, but I have learned thet there are white men within these wilds. I don't know which are ter be dreaded ther most, ther red demons or ther pale-faced renegades ter be foun' hyer."

Onward came the horses and Little Rocks decided that they would pass near the spot where he had slept. As soon as he was satisfied concerning that, he crept a few feet to where the darkness was still thicker, and there he crouched and waited.

Soon he heard voices. Eagerly he listened, and mentally he spoke an exclamation when he distinguished that the speakers were white men. But still Rocks remained in his place of concealment, with his weapons ready for use.

It was quite dark within the cottonwood grove, but the watching man finally discerned five dark forms—horses and riders—that halted not far away.

"We will stop here," said one of the riders, who was probably the leader of the party. "Dismount, attend to the horses, and build a fire."

The man who was crouching in the darkness gave a start of surprise and a silent chuckle of satisfaction.

"I reckon I know thet v'ice!" thought he. "Ef I am not badly mistaken, thet is Buck Dingle—Big Buck, ther outlaw. Luck hes put me in er fine persition ter take er peep at them critters. I will lay low and see what I shall see."

The orders of the leader were rapidly obeyed, and soon a small fire was burning brightly in the open space beneath the trees where the men had halted, revealing a rough, villainous-appearing set of fellows. But that was not all that it revealed. Little Rocks gave a gasp of surprise as his eyes rested on the form of a female—apparently a young girl and a captive!

"Jumpin' up Jeeroosalam!" breathed the spy. "A gal—a ginnowine human gal! By thunder! thar's suthin' wrong hyer! Thet leetle piece o' ther feminine gender hain't hyer o' her own free will an' accord—not by a durned sight! She's er captive! Thet's jest ez plain ez ther face on er man's nose! I wish I c'd git er peep at her features. I'll bet er hoss thet she's 'tarnal pritty!"

And Rocks soon discovered that he was right, for he obtained a glance at the captive maiden's face. Despite the traces of suffering upon it, the girl's face was one to attract more than a glance, and, at her best, it was plain that she was not far from handsome.

"Jeerickits!" gasped the man in the darkness. "A 'tarnal sight prittier nor a picter! Who can she be? Dingle has struck a prize this time fer sure; but, now that Rube Rocks has sighted his jewel, he will be apt ter lose it. I'll save thet gal or go up ther flume!"

The poor prisoner, hopeless in the hands of the brutal desperadoes, little dreamed that she had a friend so near.

The horses were led to the edge of the grove and left there to feed, guarded by one man. The others gathered around the fire in the grove.

The hidden scout saw that he was right in thinking the leader of the gang the notorious border ruffian, Buck Dingle. Big Buck, as he was often called, was marked for life, for the fingers of his left hand were gone.

Little Rocks listened to the talk of the mountain desperadoes, as they reclined in various attitudes of abandon around the fire, hoping to gain some clew to the identity of the fair captive. The marauders were jubilant over the manner in which they had avoided a party of pursuers.

"That was a great thought of yourn, Jake, turning inter that narrer defile," complimented Dingle, as he filled and lighted a cob pipe. "They never smoked the game till we struck inter the moonlight, then they went hustlin' back in such a hurry to find whar you went that they run straight past their game. But fer that I reckon we'd had ter fought the gang o' 'em."

"Oh, I ain't quite er blamed fule, ef I do look monst'r'usly thet way," grinned Jake. "I knew rite whar thet defile wuz, an' I knew ther chances wuz ten ter one thet they'd never see it. Ef they had, I'd 'a' gin them er tough chase, an' you'd met me at ther t'other eend. We had ter fight 'em thar."

"An', begobs, I wuz fer p'ace, ef yeess pl'aze!" came from the Irishman of the party. "Patsey Mulligan is a p'aceably disposed crayther, an', faith, he will ounly fight whin his legs are too w'ake t' run. It w'd be the luck av me t' catch a bullet at the sthert av the roompas, thin, be me saoul! I w'dn't be able t' run at all, at all!"

The others laughed a little, and one of them said:

"Pat, you are the biggest coward, for a genuine Irishman, that it was ever my luck to see."

"Did yeess iver say a livelier Irishman thin meself, Mither Bryant. I'm bettin' the boots av me thit yeess niver did. It is much bether t' be lively an' healthy thin t' be a brave marn an' be did. At 'aste, thit is the way I'm afther luckin' at it."

"Well," broke in Dingle, "we are going to stop here till mornin', and p'r'aps longer, so you fellers will have to build some kind of a shanty for ther gal, to keep the wind away from her. Go out and cut some bushes. Hustle around, if you want to get any sleep to-night."

Instantly the men started to obey his order, and a short time later they had completed a rude brush "wickie-up," which would protect the unfortunate girl not only from the night air, but from their curious eyes, which she dreaded most. In the brush hut—if it could be dignified by such a name—Big Buck spread some blankets, and then told the girl that her room was ready for her.

The hidden spy watched these moves with interest, for he was plotting how he could rescue the unfortunate maiden. He noticed with some surprise and not a little satisfaction that the girl was not bound. Evidently the outlaws thought her spirit too well broken to attempt to escape amid the wild fastnesses of the Big Horn Range.

It was not long after the maiden had retired to the place provided for her that her captors fell asleep with one exception, one who was detailed by the chief to keep watch over the camp. With considerable satisfaction Little Rocks noted that the guard was decidedly sleepy. The marauders were in a country where they would be more likely to find friends than foes, therefore they might not be so vigilant as they would under other circumstances. If the guard would only fall asleep for a short time the watching scout felt sure that he would be able to snatch the captive from Buck Dingle's power.

Just what Little Rocks longed for finally took place—the sentinel fell asleep. Making sure that the man was really asleep, the scout started on his perilous undertaking. No one but a man versed in woodcraft could have crept so stealthily through the darkness and could have approached the little mass of brush where lay the captive maiden without having made the slightest noise to arouse the sleeping outlaws. From behind the mass of brush the crafty little borderman lifted his head and gazed over at the four men sleeping in the red light of the dying fire.

"Jest keep rite on snoozin' ef ye know w'at's good fer ye," said Rocks, to himself. "Ef ye diskiver Leetle Rube, thar will most likely be sum trouble an' you'll be ap' ter git hurt, fer I shell fight, tooth an' nail. I'm hyer ter resky this gal, an' I'm goin' ter do et ef I hev ter wade through gore!"

He realized that the most difficult part of the undertaking was at hand—to make himself known to the girl without alarming her so that she would arouse Dingle and his satellites.

"Ev she's only lookin' fer ter be reskied!" was the brave little scout's unspoken exclamation.

Suddenly, when he least expected to do so, Rocks made a slight noise, but sufficiently loud enough to awaken a watchful man who was not quite sound asleep. With an inward imprecation, he sunk down and lay perfectly still in the

darkness behind the brush hut. He heard one of the men—probably the one who had been appointed as guard—stir and mutter something. He imagined that the man lifted his head and looked around.

For a long time the daring man lay very still. At length, he lifted his head once more and gazed over the mass of brush.

All four of the desperadoes were silently stretched beside the glowing embers of the fire, some of them lying partially within the dull red light and partially within the shadows beyond the narrow circle.

"They are all right," nodded the keen-eyed man, a smile of satisfaction resting on his bearded face as he scanned the figures. "Ef I wuz used ter cold-blooded murderin', I c'd wipe out Dingle an' three o' his cut-throats without hafe tryin'. But I never c'd do thet kind o' wuck, even though it 'u'd be er service ter ther kentry. But now fer ther gal."

It seemed almost an impossible feat to remove any of the brush at the back of the hut without arousing the outlaws or alarming the girl so that she would utter a cry; but Rocks did not hesitate, for he knew that the night was passing swiftly and another day was not far away. Slowly and carefully he began to remove the brush. This he did swiftly but silently, and in a few moments he had an opening large enough for a person to pass through on their hands and knees. Then he peered into the hut.

The light of the dying fire shone in at the opening on the other side and faintly revealed the form of the captive. The girl's face was turned toward the man who had come to rescue her and he gave a gasp of surprise as he noted that she was wide awake. Her dark eyes were fixed on his face with an inquiring look as if she would ask if he were friend or foe. He saw this and swiftly touched his lips—a motion for silence. She understood and nodded. Then he motioned for her to creep out through the opening he had made, and drawing a revolver in either hand, he arose to his feet, standing so that he could command a view of all the sleeping men.

Woe to the one who awoke then!

With almost incredible silence, the maiden crept out through the opening and arose to her feet beside the daring scout. He gave one more sharp look at the sleepers, who were so unconscious that their prize was escaping, and then, thrusting one revolver into its usual place at his belt, he grasped the girl's hand and they began to move slowly and silently away.

Little Rocks was amazed at the caution exercised by the maiden—not only surprised but delighted. Inwardly, he voted her a trump. He little knew that she had heard the first noise that he had made back of the brush and her heart had beat high with the wild hope that it was made by a friend who was coming to rescue her. Had he known this, he would have understood her coolness when she saw him peering in at her.

They finally reached the place where the scout had left his rifle. With that in his hands, Rocks felt that Buck Dingle would find it very difficult to tear the rescued girl from his grasp. He would have liked two of the outlaws' horses, but he felt that the night was too far spent for him to waste time in overpowering or deceiving the man who had been sent to watch the animals. Then, too, he would be able to hide better amid the gulches and dark fissures if he was not bothered with the animals.

In reaching the dark ravine for which he was aiming, they were forced to pass across an opening fully lit by the bright light of the moon, but this was successfully accomplished and they were soon in the shadowy depths of the fissure. But barely had they reached the cover of the shadows when a wild cry came from the cottonwoods where they had left the sleeping outlaws.

"Ha!" exclaimed the scout, half-halting in his tracks. "They have diskivered thet ther cage is empty an' ther bird flown. I'd give suthin' ter see Dingle's face at this minit. But we must git erlong, fer they'll be arter us hot foot in erbout two shakes. Cum on, leetle gal, an' trust ter Rube Rocks."

CHAPTER VIII.

MONTANA JIM'S CLOSE CALL.

TOGETHER, hand in hand, the brave little scout and the fair girl whom he had rescued from the hands of the mountain marauders hurried down the ravine. Little Rocks chuckled with delight as he pictured Big Buck's amazement and rage when he discovered that his captive was gone. Nothing gave the man in buckskin more pleasure than to circumvent wickedness and defeat the evil aims of the sinful.

Not heeding what he was doing, Rocks hurried the girl along till she was fairly gasping for breath. Then he suddenly discovered her condition and spluttered a few hasty words of apology as he slackened his pace.

"Ye see I don't keer a hoot fer them 'tarnal varmints merself," he explained; "but I don't want them ter overtake us. I might go under, then you'd fall inter ther clutches o' them devils erg'in, sure."

"Then let's hurry—do!" gasped the girl, start-

ing forward with renewed energy. "I had rather die than again become the prisoner of those terrible men!"

"Now, don't git excited, leetle one, fer I don't reckon thar's enny danger o' *sech* a misfortunate thing occurin'. They won't git arter us right away, I'm bettin'."

His words reassured and calmed the girl in a measure, although he could still feel the small soft hand which he held tremble a little. Suddenly, he asked:

"W'at's yer name, leetle gal?"

"Viona Burke."

"Thet's pritty, blame my eyes if 'tain't! It don't sound much like mine—Reuben Rocks. Folks most gineraly calls me Little Rocks, 'cause I'm so small, I s'pose. I'm one o' General Custer's scouts, sent inter ther maountings ter git ther lay o' ther lan' an' fine out whut I kin erbout ther red devils. Ther 'Yaller-haired Chief,' as ther copper-skinned imps calls him, is cumin' torud ther maountings with a hull heap o' sojers, an' I reckon Crazy Hoss, Crooked Eye an' ther rest o' ther chiefs o' ther red pirates will feel him afore long."

Suddenly the scout stopped and listened. To his ears came one or two sharp yells, the import of which he instantly understood.

"Blame my hide!" he muttered, in surprise and disgust, glancing sharply around.

The girl thought that she detected that he had interpreted those yells as meaning something of an alarming nature to them, and she tremblingly asked:

"What is it, sir?"

"Ther rotten imps o' Satan are cumin' arter us erlong this ravine!" was the reply. "How they diskivered that we kem this way is w'at gits me."

Instantly Viona was filled with terror, and she urged Rocks to run; but the cool-headed scout knew that she could not run fast enough to escape Dingle and his dastardly crew. No, the desperadoes must be turned from the trail.

A dark and narrow niche at one side of the ravine caught his eye and instantly he turned toward it. A swift examination showed that, while it was not all that he could wish, it would serve his purpose.

"Miss Viona," he said, swiftly, "I must leave you here while I go back an lead them blood-houn's on er false scent. Now, don't say a word, but trust ter Rube. Jest you keep hyer in ther dark, an' don't move fer yer life till I cum back. I'll surely cum. Remember, don't leave this spot. Good-by."

He dashed away up the ravine toward the oncoming ruffians—into the very teeth of danger! A short time later the trembling girl in the dark fissure heard the ringing report of a rifle, followed by several shrill yells.

Little Rocks had met the outlaws!

Morning was at hand and already the grayish-white light in the east told of advancing dawn when the little scout came swiftly up the ravine and approached the spot where he had left the girl when he turned back to lead Dingle's desperadoes astray.

"Ther trick wucked like er charm!" chuckled the little man in buckskin. "They went a whoopin' off arter me, red hot an' still a-beatin'. I led 'em er jolly ole chase, then guv 'em ther shake. I knew I c'u'd do it. Now fer ther gal. Then I'll scoop ontum sum hosses—borry 'em o' ther red varmints—an' take her away frum hyer."

But when he looked into the narrow fissure where he had left Viona Burke two hours before, he started back with a cry of consternation and dismay.

The girl was not there!

"Gone!" gasped the little scout, gazing blankly around. "I tole her not to stir, an' I reckoned she had sense ernuff ter mind. It can't be thet she wuz foun' by ther outlaws. P'r'aps she wuz diskivered by ther red devils! Horn o' plenty! I hope not!"

Carefully he surveyed the ground around the fissure, hoping to find something that would give him an inkling of the truth; but in that he was disappointed, for the nature of the ground was such that it did not readily receive an impression.

"I can't fine out a thing hyer," he muttered, his face clouded with disappointment. "P'r'aps she's within hearin' o' my v'ice, so I'll take ther chances an' call."

A moment later the girl's name resounded through the ravine, but only the mocking echoes answered the ranger. He was alone!

"She's gone, an' no mistook," came bitterly from his lips. "This kinder knocks me eend-ways. How in ther name o' sin am I goin' ter fine her erg'in? Ole man, this is too scand'l'usly bad—it jest is!"

After a time he decided to go back to the cottonwood grove and see if he could not pick up the trail there. But he found the grove deserted, and nothing but the demolished brush hut and the dead embers of the fire to tell that a party had camped there recently.

"I don't believe thet she's fell inter ther han's," nodded the little scout, as he leaned on his rifle in the grayish gloom of the morning and stared at the black embers and the white ashes. "Thet is sum conserlashun, ef it is mighty poor."

I don't know jest how ter go ter wuck ter hunt fer her, but I reckon she didn't cum back up this way out o' ther ravine o' her own free will an' accord. Takin' thet groun' fer a startin'-p'int, I'll s'pose she got skeered an' run away frum ther place whar I left her. In course she'd go t'other way, so I'll jest foller down ther ravine an' see whut I kin fine."

Little Rocks left the cottonwoods at a swinging trot, and kept the pace till he was far down the narrow ravine. Then he slackened his speed and began the hunt.

Rocks was doomed to disappointment, for he did not find a trace of the missing girl. She had disappeared completely and mysteriously.

It was some time after sunrise that, as he was passing along a wooded gorge, happening to glance upward, he became the witness of a desperate struggle between a red-skin and a white man, who appeared at times to hang over the very verge of the narrow shelf upon which they were. The little man in buckskin paused and gazed at the fascinating scene with breathless interest. At times the contestants—struggling for life—would reel back till they would be entirely hidden from the eyes of the anxious scout below; anon they would be in plain view, and it would seem that they were about to topple over the brink and come whirling down to death.

"By smoke!" gasped Custer's little scout, as the sweat started out upon his forehead. "That will end in the death o' one o' them—p'r'aps both. Ef I c'u'd only git in a shot, I w'u'd be able ter guv thet white er longer lease o' life."

With his rifle ready for use, he continued to watch the battle for life. Suddenly, as both of the men seemed on the point of plunging down to their doom, he swiftly flung his Winchester to his shoulder, and a second later the clear, ringing report echoed along the gorge. The small puff of smoke shut his target out from view for an instant, then, as it dissolved in air, he saw a dark form come whirling down from the ledge and strike a short distance away. His bullet had done its deadly work, but it seemed that he had not been soon enough to save the white, for he saw another form clinging to a yielding bush two feet below the edge of the ledge, hanging between life and death!

With his heart in his mouth, Little Rocks gazed up at the imperiled man. What could he do to save him? Nothing! It would be impossible to reach the man before the bush gave way or he relaxed his hold and followed the red-skin down to death. It was plain to see that, without other aid than his own efforts, the clinging man could not hope to reach the ledge. He could only cling to the bush till it gave way or his strength failed. It was a miracle that he had obtained the hold at all.

"He's er gone coon!" groaned the man in the ravine. "Thar hain't no chance fer him! My God! w'y didn't I shoot sooner!"

Then a cry of delight broke from his lips as he saw another—a white man—appear on the ledge near the spot where the man was still clinging with desperate energy to the bush. A wild yell that instantly attracted the new-comer's attention pealed from Little Rube's lips, and he fairly hugged himself with delight as he saw the stranger peer over the edge of the precipice.

"He'll save him! he'll save him!" came from the scout's lips, as he allowed his sudden revulsion of feeling to betray him into a dance. "Thet is great luck, by Jinks!"

The new-comer, who wore a long black beard, said a few words, evidently of encouragement, to the man clinging to the yielding bush; then he swiftly uncoiled a lariat from around his waist. This he let down to the imperiled one who grasped it in his teeth and then seized it with his hands. The black-bearded man was evidently the possessor of remarkable strength, for he drew the other up to the ledge and safety with apparent ease.

It was a "close call" for Montana Jim.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD PARDS—THE WARNING—FACE TO FACE.

WHEN he had been drawn up to safety, Montana Jim sunk down quite exhausted at the feet of his rescuer, not even being able to gasp out a word of thanks just then. The struggle with the Indian had nearly deprived him of his "wind," and clinging to the bush had completed the work. The man who had so fortunately appeared on the scene coolly re-coiled the lasso, scarcely glancing at the man he had saved, as he said:

"Pretty snug rub, stranger. If I hadn't happened to have been following that red devil and heard the shot fired by the man below, you would have gone to your death in the gorge."

As soon as Jim could gain his breath sufficiently, he began to express his thanks for the service rendered. The black-bearded man cut him short with a gesture.

"Thanks leave an unpleasant taste in my mouth," he said, gravely, almost sternly. "I do not care for them, for I did nothing to deserve them. True, I pulled you out of a bad place, but any man who had found you in a similar position would have done the same. I deserve no credit for doing anything remarkable."

"P'r'aps thet's ther way you look at it,"

grunted the old prospector, as he struggled to his feet; "but it don't make it out thet ye didn't save my life jest ther same. At least, you'll let me grip yer han'."

But the stranger drew back.

"I have not touched the hand of an honest man for years," came sadly from his lips. "No one cares to grasp the hand of a criminal."

Jim was staggered for an instant, but he quickly recovered enough to say:

"Bosh, man! Criminal or not, ye saved my life! Gi'n us yer paw!"

The black-bearded man shook his head slowly and soberly.

"My hand is stained with human blood!" he confessed, holding the member up before him as if it were accursed. "You must not touch it!"

Then he wheeled and seemed about to go back along the cliff, but the voice of the man he had saved from death caused him to pause for an instant.

"Ennyhow, ye can tell me yer name. Mine's Jim Farley, often called Montana Jim."

"My name!" came bitterly from the black-beard, as he raised his hand an instant and then pointed with his index finger at the ground—"my name is buried in the grave with the charred bones of my victim!"

A moment later Montana Jim stood alone on the ledge.

"Wa-al, wa-al!" muttered the veteran. "Ef thet don't git me, may I be tickled ter death with 'skeeters! He wuz more nor a pecoohar cuss, he wuz! W'y, thet man orter belong ter a professional drammatic club, or er war-club, or suthin' o' thet sort. He'd shoonly make his forchune afore ther footlights ef he'd jest act ez well ez he did then. But I wonder whar ther feller is thet shot ther red. Who c'u'd he 'a' bin?"

Then Jim peered over the verge of the precipice down into the wooded gorge, but he could see nothing of the man who had fired the shot that had slain the red-skin.

"He's gone," muttered the old prospector. "I wonder whar he's gone ter? Waal, I reckon I'd better git back ter ther boys. I'm pritty well shoooken up."

When he reached the camp he was surprised to find a little man in buckskin there talking familiarly with Harry. As soon as Jim caught a glimpse of the buckskin-attired individual's face he halted with an ejaculation of amazement:

"Great Scoot! Leetle Rocks, or I'm er double-barreled liar!"

The little scout had found his way to the fortune-hunters' camp and had learned from Handy Harry's lips that it was probably an old friend, Montana Jim, that he had seen engaged in the deadly encounter with the red-skin. At the prospector's words he sprang up with a cry of delight and extended his hand.

"It's me, sure ez shootin'," he laughed, as he felt Jim's grip. "How are ye, old man?"

"Jest erlive, thanks ter you an' t'other feller," was the reply. "Your shot fixed ther red, an' t'other feller pulled me out o' er bad hole. He was a quare cuss, you bet!"

"Whar is he?"

"Don't ax me. He slid out 'bout ez soon ez he got me up ter whar I c'u'd take care o' merself."

"But you foun' out his name?"

"Nary; he w'u'dn't guv it, though I axed ez perlite ez ye please. He went ter rantin' suthin' 'bout his han's bein' stained with blood, an' his name bein' burried in ther grave o' his victim. Oh, he wuz quare!"

"I sh'u'd say so," agreed Rocks, who still held Jim's hands. "But ye don't know how glad I am ter see ye, ole pard."

"An' I'm pritty nigh tickled ter death ter git my peepers ont'er you, ye little runt. How in ther name o' all thet's blessed kem ye hyer?"

With a few words the little scout explained why he was there, and the three miners were much surprised to learn that the Boys in Blue, under General Custer, were approaching the mountains.

"He intends ter l'arn ther red varmints er lesson," explained Rocks. "I hev bin sent out ter diskiver ther position o' ther critters, an' erbout how strong they are. Thet 'splains why I am hyer."

Then he briefly told of his adventures since entering the mountains, dwelling in particular on the rescue and disappearance of the beautiful girl. During this part of the story he observed that the three fortune-seekers became not only interested but excited. When he finished, Montana Jim gave his thigh a resounding slap, and cried:

"Same gal!"

"Without a doubt," assented Handy Harry; and Silent Seth nodded his agreement.

"W'at do ye mean?" eagerly asked the scout.

Then it was Montana Jim's turn to relate their adventures of the preceding night, telling of the mysterious night riders, the strange bundle which one carried, the cry for help and the fruitless chase through the moonlight and the shadows. Rocks was deeply interested, and when the narrative was finished, he agreed that it was the same girl without doubt who had called to them.

"She must be found," cried Montana Jim. "Well, you gentlemen will never live to find her unless you keep your eyes a little more about you."

At the sound of the strange voice four men wheeled and covered the speaker with as many cocked weapons. They saw standing less than fifteen feet away a tall, straight figure, wearing a blue coat and hat covered with yellow cord and gleaming buttons. The man's face was covered by a mask. He made no effort to draw a weapon as he saw them turn on him, but a half-mocking laugh came from beneath the mask.

"You are ready enough with your guns now," he said, carelessly folding his arms; "but, if I had been after blood, I could have salted you all before you could have obtained the drop."

There was no denying the truth of this statement, and both Montana Jim and Little Rocks flushed with shame. It was a disgrace to be caught napping in such a way. But Handy Harry was not disconcerted in the least.

"Hello!" smiled the sport, serenely. "What kind of a blue bird with yellow plumage is this? If this was my day for shooting I should think that I had struck a bonanza."

"If this was my day for shooting," bowed the mask, "you would be fitted for planting now."

"Sho! Dost think so? Perhaps. But who in the name of the inventor of colors are you?"

"I am Captain Nameless, chief of the Blue Coats."

"So? Didst serve in the Late War or the Revolution? In what division were you, my friend of the hidden face and yellow plumage? Or possibly you may have failed to get into division and have been left struggling along in addition, subtraction, or multiplication."

Captain Nameless uttered an exclamation of impatience and anger.

"You have a very long tongue in your head, young man, but I fancy that there is a corresponding lack of brains. I did not come here to bandy words but to warn you of danger."

Harry yawned openly.

"Here is another of 'em," he nodded, speaking just loud enough for the mask to hear. "Warnings are coming thick and fast. First it was a crazy woman with white hair; now it is a cranky galoot in yellow and blue. If we could live on warnings, we would have provender enough for a winter supply."

The Blue Coat chief seemed to lose his temper a little.

"I came to you with friendly intentions, but I have been received in a far from agreeable manner. I did have something to say, but I now prefer to keep my lips closed."

"If you do, you'll be sure not to catch cold in your teeth," observed the card-sharp, gravely.

Captain Nameless paid no heed to Harry's words, but addressed the others:

"For your sakes, gentlemen, I will warn you to turn back and leave these mountains. There is nothing for you here but death!"

Then he turned and walked steadily away from the camp till he was hidden from view, not heeding Handy Harry, who called after the retreating figure:

"Ta, ta, cap'n! Call again when we are not so busy."

Barely had the figure of the Blue Coat chief vanished when another stranger appeared near our friends. It was the black-bearded man who had rescued Montana Jim. He swiftly advanced toward the little party, not heeding Handy Harry's leveled revolver.

"I saw him here!" came thrillingly from his lips, as his eyes seemed fastened on the spot where Captain Nameless was last seen. "He is a devil! He pretended to warn you! Bah! To Hades with his warnings! That man is the leader of a band who wear blue coats and hide their faces by masks. I believe him to be an outlaw and desperado. You had best get away before he returns and brings his villains with him."

Then the strange being seemed about to hurry from the place when Silent Seth cried:

"Stop! I know you!"

Like a hunted animal, his hand grasping the butt of a revolver, the man of the black beard wheeled toward the speaker, a terrible gleam in his dark eyes.

"Who claims to know me?" he hissed—"who dares?"

"I do," replied the silent man boldly. "I know you—know you well!"

"Who in God's name are you?"

"Look in my face—look sharp! Don't you know me?"

For several moments the two seemed to glare into each other's eyes, then he of the raven beard reeled back a step, groaning:

"Know you?—yes, I know you now! Would to God I did not! I hoped never to see you again."

"And I," declared Seth, "have been hunting everywhere for you. I have found you at last."

A cry of intense pain and fury that seemed to come from the man's very heart broke from that black beard.

"Yes, you have found me, but what am I? A hunted creature with his hands stained

with human blood. Curse you! For your crime I was imprisoned and hunted like a dog. Your crime drove me to another—your crime made a murderer of me—stained my hands with human blood! Ah-ha! Your life should pay the penalty!"

Then, like an infuriated lion, the man of the black beard leaped upon Silent Seth and hurled him to the ground, fiercely crying:

"Lay there at the feet of the man you ruined!"

With cries of amazement and anger, Seth's friends covered the man who had just performed this mad act. He saw their cocked and leveled weapons and smiled bitterly as he folded his arms across his breast, saying with sudden calmness:

"Shoot!" But in an instant the one who had been hurled to the earth started up with uplifted hand, gasping:

"Stay—hold! don't fire!"

CHAPTER X.

THE WHITE ROSE OF THE SIOUX.

A GASP of amazement came from Max Burke's lips as his eyes rested on that figure bending over him in the white moonlight. At first he more than half believed himself to be dreaming. The sight of a female figure in such a place and at such a time was enough to startle and astound the greatest Stoic; but when the female proved to be young and beautiful, it was almost too incredible for belief. Max rubbed his eyes and stared again. The girl was there without a doubt, and with one slender finger she touched her lips as a warning for him to be silent.

At first the young man had thought his unexpected visitor a young Indian girl, for her garments from her head to the small, beaded moccasins on her feet were similar to those of a young squaw, although much better than the average Indian maiden wore. Her dark, straight hair, which flowed over her shoulders, added to this first impression; but a glance at her face left him in doubt, for, although quite dark-complexioned, her features were not those of an Indian.

When she saw that the young man was aroused, the strange girl glanced around as if fearful that they might be seen by some one near at hand. Max improved the opportunity to arise to his feet. When she saw this, she started back, appearing fearful that he was about to grasp her.

"Don't be afraid," said the young man, softly, his eyes filled with a light of admiration. "I will not harm you."

"The pale-face is very good," came from her lips in a low, musical voice.

For several moments they stood thus, Max devouring with his eyes the faultless contour of the strange maiden's form and the singular wild beauty of her dusky face, while she did not venture to let her midnight eyes meet his piercing gray orbs. Finally, she ventured to speak:

"The pale-faces are in danger here."

"In danger?" repeated the old rancher's son, in a puzzled way. "Surely you are a pale-face yourself?"

But the girl shook her head. "The Sioux are my people," she declared, flashing a glance into his face and then letting her eyes fall again.

"But you have white blood in your veins!" exclaimed Max, a bit incautiously, at which she lifted her hand and glanced swiftly around once more.

"The enemies of the pale-faces are as thick as the leaves of the forest trees. Speak low like the wind as it whispers through the pines if you do not wish to be heard by those enemies. There are bad whites and strong red-men in the shadows of the Big Hills to-night."

"What do you mean?"

"Crooked Eye and his warriors are looking for the two pale braves that they failed to take captives. Some of the red-men were slain and their friends cry for vengeance. Death lurks in wait for the two young pale-faces."

"And you came here to warn us?"

"Yes. I know not why, but something told me to come. I knew not where to find the two young pale-faces of whom I heard my people speak, but an unseen hand led me to them."

"By Jove!" cried the young rancher in guarded tones; "you are no Indian girl! Your face tells me that, and you speak English perfectly. Whotaught you the language of the pale-face?"

"A poor woman who was a captive among my people. She was kind to me and I loved her. She often told me that I had white blood in my veins."

"And she was right! I do not believe that there is a drop of Indian blood in your body!"

The young man's admiration and enthusiasm was running away with his tongue, and although he did not suspect such a thing, he was already more than half in love with the strange girl of the mountains. There was a feeling of admiration in his manly bosom as his large eyes feasted on her picturesque beauty as revealed by the white moonlight. He imagined that she looked like a Gypsy queen.

"Oh, you cannot be right!" came from the

lips of the singular girl; but Max fancied that he detected a thrill of joy in her voice.

"I am sure that I am," he boldly asserted. "The Sioux are not your people?"

"They are all the people I know," she said sadly, as she bowed her head still lower.

Max was growing desperate. He could scarcely choke down the burning words which seemed struggling for utterance; with the greatest difficulty he refrained from catching that sylph-like form in his arms and whispering in her ear that he would be her friend and protector if she would let him. Only a fear of spoiling everything by such haste and rashness deterred him.

Once more they were silent for several moments, standing there amid the towering mountains bathed in the pale moonlight. The young man was at a loss what to say. He had forgotten his comrade of the lonely hunt for Viona and vengeance; he had forgotten everything but the wild flower which he had so unexpectedly found amid the mountains of Northern Wyoming.

Suddenly she lifted her head, saying resolutely:

"I must go now."

Max caught his breath and started forward. "Must go? But you will surely tell me your name before you leave me. I wish to know who has risked so much to befriend us."

"They call me the White Rose of the Sioux," she replied, as she turned away. "Remember my warning. Be on your guard for foes; they are all around you."

Max restrained himself no longer; with one bound, he was at her side and had caught her hand.

"Tell me," came hoarsely from his lips, "when shall I see you again?"

She swiftly but gently disengaged her hand, and then glided swiftly away, waving him back. At a point where the moonlight and shadow met she paused for an instant, her strange beauty fully revealed by the former.

"When will you see me again?" she repeated, in rich, musical tones which seemed to tremble with sadness. "I know not—perhaps never! Farewell!"

Then she was swallowed up by the shadows.

For a long time Max stood staring toward the spot where she had vanished, and a sigh came from his lips as he turned away. To his surprise, he noticed that Victor was wide awake and had been watching him—had probably witnessed everything that had passed between him and the strange girl.

"Hello!" gasped Max.

"Hello yourself," retorted Victor. "What have you been up to, old man?"

"Didn't you see?"

"Yes, I must confess that I saw everything from the first. I think the first words which passed between you aroused me. I must plead guilty of eavesdropping."

"Under the circumstances, you are pardoned. But what do you think?"

"Of what?"

Max seemed a bit confused, at which Victor laughed.

"It's all right, pard," he half laughed. "You got along famously on short acquaintance. But, to tell the truth, I think we had better heed that strange girl's warning and keep our eyes open a little more. Had she been a hostile, she could have snuffed us both out and lifted our hair without the least trouble. I motion that we move and keep a sharper eye out after this. One of us had better remain awake while the other sleeps after this."

"Yes, you are right. We had best move to a spot where the moonlight will not expose us as it does here. I will take my first turn at standing guard."

"If you have any hope of seeing your fair visitor again to-night, I think you will be disappointed."

They moved back into the shadows and lay discussing the remarkable events of the day and night, but it was noticeable that Max seemed to like to talk of the latter best. Apparently the White Rose of the Sioux was constantly in his mind. Finally, Victor rolled himself in his blanket and fell asleep again, leaving his comrade sitting like a faithful watch-dog beside him.

For an hour the sentinel sat there listening to the faint nocturnal sounds and thinking of the strange girl who had stood before him in the moonlight a short time before. Finally, he started slightly and uttered a low exclamation. His sharp eyes had seen a dark, fitting shadow some distance away. Revolver in hand, he watched and waited.

A few moments passed, and then the dark form came out into the full light of the moon and halted. Again a low exclamation came from his lips.

It was the form of a female!

"Heavens!" he breathed, starting to his feet. "Can she have returned?"

When the figure moved away Max followed. Whoever the unknown was, she moved swiftly and the young man found it difficult to follow her through the light and shadows. He succeeded, however, and finally had the satisfaction of seeing the figure halt again in the moonlight.

Cautiously he crept forward till he could command a good view of the unknown. A faint exclamation of disappointment escaped him, at the same time he was transfixed with wonder and surprise.

The figure in the moonlight was that of a wild-appearing white-haired woman—not the White Rose of the Sioux!

At that instant he heard a slight noise behind him and tried to wheel, weapon in hand; but he was too late. A heavy instrument struck him a crushing blow on the head, and he fell senseless to the ground!

CHAPTER XI.

SCAR-FACE SPEAKS A NAME.

VIONA BURKE found her position anything but pleasant after she was left alone in the dark niche by the daring little scout who had torn her from the clutches of the mountain marauders. She sunk upon the ground, covering her face with her hands and listening. It was not long before she heard the ringing report of a rifle followed by several shrill cries, and she knew that her new-found friend had met the outlaws.

"Heaven protect him!" came in a faint whisper from her white lips. "He seems to be good and brave, and I hope that nothing will befall him."

Then she fell to listening again, but a strange dead silence seemed to hover over the mountain wilds—a silence unbroken and ominous. From the dark fissure where she half-sat and half-reclined with her back against a rocky wall, she could look up out of the ravine and see a single mountain peak bathed in the silvery light. For a long time she lay there with her eyes fastened on the mountain top. Finally, she fancied that she heard a soft, cat-like sound in the ravine.

"What was that?" she gasped, gazing out of the fissure into the shadowy darkness of the gorge. "He cannot be returning so soon, and if it is not he, it must be enemies. I will keep still and pray that they do not find me here."

Slowly the minutes slipped by, but not a living soul approached her hiding-place. She knew not how long she lay there gazing out into the shadowy ravine, but it seemed hours. How lonely it was! Everything seemed so silent and dead! At last, she began to fancy that it would be a relief if she could see any moving object or hear a sound. And then, without doubt, she did hear a soft, cat-like tread. Keeping her eyes fixed on the ravine, she soon saw two dark, swift-moving figures go gliding past, one after another.

They were Indian warriors!

With her eyes fixed and staring into the darkness, she continued to watch, but her vigil was unrewarded, for she saw no more moving figures. Finally, as she lay there, her thoughts turned to her home. Since her unfortunate captivity she had been almost always thinking of home—thinking of the brutal blow that felled her poor mother at her feet. Her heart was filled with bitterness whenever she thought of it, and often her soundless lips would form the cry:

"Is there no justice—is there no God? Can such brutal murderers be permitted to go unpunished? Is the word *retribution* a mockery?"

Now, as she lay there in the dark fissure, her thoughts turned to Victor, the noble fellow whom she had nursed through a terrible sickness—the only man whom she felt in her heart of hearts that she could ever love. Where was he? He and Max were miles away when the marauders came down on their little home and did their fiendish work. Where were they now? Would she ever see Victor again? As she lay there, thinking of him, she fell asleep.

When Viona awoke she uttered a little gasp of alarm, for in the darkness she saw a human figure bending over her. Then remembering where she was and what had occurred, she exclaimed:

"Oh, you have come back at last! I am glad!"

But it was a strange voice—the voice of a woman—that replied:

"Don't be frightened, child, for I will not harm you, but I am not the one that you are expecting. He may be dead now, whoever he is. I am alive, and I will lead you to a place of safety, if you will trust me."

The girl gave a gasp of wonder and amazement.

"Who are you?" she managed to ask.

"I am a woman, like yourself," was the reply. "I will be your friend, and I know that you need friends now. I know all about your trouble."

The girl's amazement increased.

"You know all about me!" she repeated. "How can that be? It is impossible!"

"No, no! it is not impossible. I often dream about things that will occur, and I dreamed I saw the bad white men of these mountains burn a home and carry away a beautiful girl, whom I thought they were bringing direct to their retreat amid these wilds. In my dream I saw three men who were seeking to find a fortune, and those men were encamped in the very path of oncoming desperadoes. I knew the place where the men were encamped and I hastened to warn them. I saw the wild chase through the moon-

light and the shadows, but I did not see the termination. Fate led me here to find you."

Viona listened in astonishment to this strange story. It seemed incredible, yet the woman spoke in a straightforward, earnest way and appeared to be telling the truth. Once more the girl asked the question:

"Who are you?"

"The red men call me White-Hair, and they seem to think that I am a witch. I know why they think so; it is because I can sometimes tell what will happen in the future. I only repeat what I see in my dreams."

"You are a white woman?"

"As white as you are.—But come, we had better go away from here, for we may be found by the outlaws or the reds. I had rather be found by the latter, for I can control them by fear. The white-faced marauders of the mountains do not fear me so much. Come."

"But I told him that I would wait here till he returned."

"Who?"

"The brave man who rescued me from the desperadoes. They were following us and he turned back to lead them on a false hunt. He met them, for I heard the report of a rifle and several wild yells."

"He may never return, my child, for he may be dead now. You had better come with me. I have a hidden home not far away, and you will be safe there. I will undertake to find this man you speak of, for, if he does return and find you gone, he will be apt to stay in this vicinity, hoping to find you again."

For some time Viona hesitated, but the woman urged her so hard and made such a persuasive argument that the girl finally decided to accompany her to her hidden home. She could not bear the thought of being left there in the dark shadows again.

It was almost sunrise when they descended into a small mountain pocket, which was surrounded on all sides by almost perpendicular walls, and to which there seemed but one way of approach, the steep and dangerous path which they trod.

"I have never known a white man to find his way into this pocket since I have been here," declared the woman, as she aided Viona to descend. "An Indian found it once, but his grave is down there."

"You killed him?"

"No, I did not do it. I do not live down here alone."

Just then the girl was too busily occupied in avoiding a fall to ask who lived with the strange woman, whose hair she saw by the gray morning light was snowy white.

Finally they reached the bottom, and then Viona saw what she had not perceived before—a rude hut built beneath an overhanging cliff. From the cliff trailed a mass of vines which fell nearly to the ground, and quite concealed the hidden hut from any one who might be gazing into the pocket. Noticing the girl's look of wonder, the white-haired woman explained:

"That hut was built in that singular place so that we might live in seclusion from the rest of the world. Those vines were trained to hang in that manner. The cabin is built against the solid rock apparently, but there is a fissure in that rock which carries the smoke from our fires away and lets it out somewhere, but where I have been unable to discover."

They went forward and passed beneath the vines. As they did so, a wild, grotesque figure arose from where it had been crouching beside the hut, and they found themselves confronted by the scar-faced man of the mountains. Both females started back with cries of surprise and terror.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the wild man. "You did not expect to find me here. You were not looking for Scar-Face. Ho! ho! I am apt to appear when I am least expected. I am the Monarch of the Mountains, and I can go where I please. Who shall dare to stand in my path?"

The white-haired woman gave a gasp and carried both of her hands to her head, then she stood in the red morning sunlight, that was beginning to sift in through the vines, staring at the deformed figure before her as if she had seen a ghost.

"You look frightened," came sneeringly from the creature's lips, as he advanced a step and stood in a crouching attitude, as if about to leap upon the woman of the white hair. "Your face has turned the color of your hair. It cannot be that you are afraid of me! Surely there is nothing about me to give you fear," he continued, sneeringly, his disfigured face working strangely as he noted the effect of his words. "I know that I am not as handsome as I was before I fell in love with one of your sex; but then, it cannot be that my looks have anything to do with the color of your face."

He did not appear to notice Viona, and the girl stood spellbound by a sort of fascination and terror. Who and what was this terrible scar-faced creature? It was evident that he was not the one who lived in the secluded pocket with the white-haired woman, for from her looks, the amazed maiden saw that she was speechless and paralyzed with an emotion that seemed to be fear.

Slowly, as a cat creeps toward a mouse, the deformed crept nearer to the woman of the hidden hut, his claw-like hands working convulsively, as if they itched to fasten themselves in the fear-stricken female's flesh. Viona tried to cry out with horror, but only a low, gasping sound came from her throat.

At length the deformed halted within reach of the woman.

"Don't you know me, Lyla?"

There was no reply, for the woman was still incapable of speaking.

"You do not answer, yet it seems that you must know me. Have I changed so very much since you last looked on this face? It was handsome then—it should be handsome now! I was tall and straight then—I should be so now! Have I changed? It must be, or you would know me. Ah-a! you have changed as well! There are lines—deep lines—upon the face that was the fairest God's sunlight ever shone upon; your hair, once dark-brown, is white as the driven snow now. Oh, yes! you too have changed! It has not been all sunshine since that black night that, with him at your side, you fled into the darkness, with the red flames of your burning home eating a hole in the blackness behind you. Oh, no! it has not been all sunshine!"

"And I—look at my face!" he hissed, bending still nearer, till the red sunlight that found its way through the mass of vines fell full upon that terribly scarred countenance. "It makes you shudder with horror. I do not wonder. For years I have not looked at the reflection of that face, and during those years I have been hunting for you and the other! I have found you at last! Have you suffered? Gods! I have endured the tortures of hell-fire! But the end has not come, Lyla!"

Suddenly the woman found her voice, and fairly shrieked:

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"Who am I?" came hissing from his lips, as one claw-like hand darted forward and clutched her wrist. "Don't you know me, you false one of the past? I am the man you left behind in the burning house, with a knife in his breast—I am Rupert Weston!"

With a sudden uplifting of her hands, and a wild shriek, the white-haired woman fell to the ground at his feet!

CHAPTER XII.

REUNITED—SHOT DOWN.

WHEN Victor Leclair awoke it was almost morning, and Max was gone. He was surprised that his friend had not called him to act as guard during the last part of the night, and his surprise increased when he discovered that Max was not in the immediate vicinity. He leaped to his feet and glanced keenly around, softly calling the name of the missing one, but there was no answer.

"Where can he have gone?" muttered Victor, a heavy foreboding of evil resting like a dead weight on his heart. "He should be within the sound of my voice."

"Once more he repeated his friend's name, and this time one of the horses replied with a low neigh. Then he listened, while gazing helplessly into the moonlight, but he was not rewarded by hearing any other sound.

"Strange—very strange. It cannot be that he has been foolish enough to go away to search for that girl—our midnight visitor? No, I can hardly think Max capable of doing such a foolish thing—and yet, where is he?"

It was a perplexing question, but at this moment the young man saw Max's rifle lying on the ground at his feet.

"Ah!" he cried; "here is his rifle! He cannot have gone far, for he would have taken that. He must be near, so I will look for him."

Picking up his own rifle, he sauntered slowly away through the pale moonlight and the grim shadows. He knew that day was at hand, for already the light of the moon had lost its silvery luster, and seemed thin and ghostly, showing that daylight was beginning to mingle with it, although sunrise was yet a great way off.

After the young man had walked quite a distance in one direction, he turned back and walked the other way. But this petit search was unrewarded—he saw nothing of his comrade. At length he returned to the place where they had halted for the night, and he had begun to feel alarmed as well as puzzled. What did the strange disappearance mean?

"He is gone!" said Victor, speaking aloud to himself. "I must face the truth—my friend has left me for some reason. It may be that the strange girl who aroused me from slumber last night cast a spell of some kind over him. If I was at all superstitious, I might think so, but as it is, I cannot account for this unexpected disappearance. He may have fallen asleep and walked away in a somnambulist trance, but I did not know that he was subject to such spells. No, his absence cannot be accounted for in that way. I am afraid that I shall have to give it up as an unsolvable enigma."

"But I am going to do my best to find him. I will attend to the horses and then start out. If I do not find some trace of him by noon, I will return."

This he proceeded to do. First he watered the animals and then he picketed them where they would have an excellent chance to feed on the short, rich grass. Then he carefully concealed Max's rifle, crouched on one knee and wrote a short note on a leaf torn from a blank book he carried, placed it where Max would be sure to find it if he returned, and then was up and away.

There is no need of following every uncertain footstep of the young man, but at a short time after sunrise he saw a strange-appearing deformed creature with a terribly scarred face push its way out of a mass of bushes and run swiftly away down a slope. Victor stood still, filled with amazement, and watched the ugly figure till it disappeared. Then he drew a long breath and muttered:

"I wonder what that was? By Jove! it gave me a start when it came bursting from these bushes. I thought it was some kind of an animal and was on the point of letting fly at it. I suppose it was a man, for with the exception of that hump on its back, it was not so badly formed; but, ye gods! that face was a terror to behold!"

For a time he stood there trying to decide which way to turn. At length, his natural curiosity caused him to wish to know what there was beyond the bushes from which the strange unknown had come.

"I believe I will have a look," he decided.

With some difficulty, he forced his way through the thick mass and was surprised to find himself looking down into a little pocket which appeared to be surrounded on every side by perpendicular walls of rock. But at his feet he saw what appeared to be a rude and somewhat dangerous path by which a person might descend into the pocket without accident if fortunate.

"I am going to try it," he half-laughed. "I don't know what makes me feel so, but it seems that I shall find something down there that I wish to see. I am going down."

And go down he did, succeeding in reaching the bottom of the pocket safely.

"Ah! here I am, right side up with care. Now to have a look around and see what I can see. Ha! what is that? A cabin, by gracious! But, what a singular place to build it! It is evident that the owner does not want his place of abode seen from the outside of this pocket. I wonder what kind of people can live in such a place? The door is open, and I am going to take a peep at the place. I will be all ready for snags."

With his rifle ready for use, he advanced to the cabin, passing under the hanging vines. He glanced in at the open door and then became transfixed with amazement.

Within the cabin, resting upon a low couch, he saw a white-haired and pale-faced woman. But the sight of her was not what held him spellbound. Bending over the woman was one whom he knew well. She turned—he saw her face—then he sprang forward.

"Viona!"

The name echoed through the hidden hut beneath the overhanging cliff, and the girl turned swiftly to see his tall figure in the doorway.

"Victor!"

The next instant they were clasped in each other's arms—reunited!

It is impossible to describe that meeting. The beautiful maiden, who had suffered so much, was almost beside herself with joy, and she laughed, cried, and attempted to talk all at the same time, while Victor—daring fellow!—covered her face with kisses.

"Oh, my little darling!" he whispered, his face beaming with delight. "Have I really found you? It seems too good to be true! I did not dream when fate led my feet in this direction that I would find you down here in this strange place. It was by accident that I found the path that led down into the pocket."

"God must have guided you!" came earnestly from the lips of the happy girl. "Oh, Victor! I feared I should never see your face again! A kind Providence has brought us together!"

After the first rapture of their meeting, she hurriedly told him of her adventure, explaining how she came to be where he had found her. The strange white-haired woman paid little attention to the lovers after Victor's first appearance. Indeed, she appeared like one dazed, and as she lay on the couch, her white lips kept muttering:

"He is dead, dead, dead! he is dead, dead, dead!"

"She has been so ever since that terrible man with the scarred face was here," explained Viona. "He nearly frightened her to death."

"But for him, I should not have found my way here," said the young lawyer. "Therefore, we have something to thank him for, darling."

"But how is it that you were here in the mountains? It is your turn to explain."

This Victor did briefly and plainly, yet telling of all their adventures since starting on the trail of the kidnappers. Viona was delighted when she learned that Max was near.

"Surely you will be able to find him with lit-

tle difficulty!" she cried. "Oh, my big, noble brother! how I long to see him!"

"Yes, I think I can find him, for he will probably return to the place where we stopped last night. Ah! I little thought then how near I was to you! Had I known what you were enduring, I should not have slept a moment. When I have found Max, we will make haste to get out of this outlaw and Indian infested land."

"That's right, young feller; when you find him, just you take a clean scoot for civilization. It'll be more healthy fer you there, I reckon."

The speaker's burly form blocked the doorway, and a single glance showed the girl who he was—Buck Dingle! She uttered a gasp of terror and shrunk away, holding up her hand crying:

"The murderer!"

Victor Leclair's hand flew toward a revolver, but a weapon gleamed in Dingle's hand, and the man's harsh voice rung out stern and commanding:

"Touch it, and you die! My weppin covers yer brain, an' you had best be careful! Let up!"

With a gasp of rage the young lawyer was forced to obey, but he demanded:

"What do you want?"

"That gal!"

A moan of despair came from Viona's lips; it cut her lover's heart like a keen knife.

"Wretch!" he cried, facing the man with the revolver, his dark eyes fairly blazing. "Villain—kidnapper—blood-stained wretch! you shall not touch her!"

Big Buck laughed sneeringly.

"Sha'n't, eh?" he snarled. "We'll see. Down you go!"

Then the revolver spoke, and Victor fell heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SIOUX CAPTIVE'S DOOM.

It was the strange man of the black beard who had struck Max Burke senseless, and as he stood above the fallen man, he muttered:

"I know not who you are, young man, or your object in following her, but I am sure that you will follow her no further to-night. Evidently that blow knocked you senseless, but I do not fancy it cracked your skull."

He bent over the unconscious man and made a hasty examination, drawing a deep breath of satisfaction as he arose.

"He will be all right within a short time," came from the man's lips. "There is no more blood on my hands to be answered for at the Judgment Bar. Heaven knows they are red enough already!"

When he looked toward where the white-haired woman had stood in the moonlight, he discovered that she was no longer there.

"Where can she be going to-night?" he muttered, starting forward. "She appears to be having another of her wild spells, and at such times it is impossible to keep her quiet. I will try to follow her."

Then he hurried away and vanished amid the shadows.

For a long time Max lay where he had fallen beneath that heavy blow, appearing like a corpse—like the body of a man who had fallen on his face in the last moments of his dying agony. Finally he stirred and uttered a faint moan. A few moments later he started up, looking wildly around and pressing one hand to his aching head.

"What has happened?" he faintly whispered. "Oh, yes! I remember now! the mountain fell upon my head—ha! ha!"

For several minutes he sat there gazing vacantly around, appearing puzzled.

"I wonder who pulled the mountain off after it fell on me," he finally said. "Some one must have done it or I should be beneath it now. What was I doing? Ah! I remember! I was following the beautiful girl—the White Rose. I wonder where she could have gone? I will try to find her."

He arose to his feet, but staggered a little as he walked. He was dazed and his senses were still in a whirl. As luck had it, he turned his face away from the camp and walked in a direction that was taking him further and further from his friend, whom he seemed to have entirely forgotten.

"I am weak," came from his lips. "No wonder! Who wouldn't be weak after having a mountain fall upon them! It is a wonder that I am not dead. But I must find her—the beautiful girl. I know that I shall find her. Hark! what was that? It was her voice! She is calling—I must hasten!"

He had heard nothing but the distant cry of some prowling animal, but he hurried forward with redoubled energy. On, on he rushed through the shadows and the moonlight, over the rocks and across dangerous fissures—he did not pause in his mad haste to reach—what?

Morning was not far distant when he found himself sitting on a small bowlder gazing blankly around. He could not imagine how he came there. Where was he? What had happened? Suddenly he remembered.

"Some one struck me on the back of the head," he said, aloud, gently touching the spot where the black-bearded man's weapon had fallen. "The blow must have rendered me unconscious; but how in the name of wonder did I come here? I am sure that this spot is not in the immediate vicinity of our camping-place."

After a time, he seemed to divine the truth—he had wandered there while somewhat delirious from the shock of the blow.

"Well, I must find my way back somehow, but I am at a loss which way to turn. This is a pretty scrape that I have fallen into. I wonder what Victor will think when he awakens and finds himself alone. Which way shall I move?"

That was a difficult thing to decide, but, at length, he started in a direction that seemed to be right, but which was, in truth, exactly opposite from the course that he ought to have pursued. Steadily onward he tramped till the gray light of dawn began to mingle with the moonlight. Suddenly he halted.

"I know that I am badly out of my way," came slowly from his lips; "but how am I to know which way to go?"

That was an unanswerable question. After a time, he decided to change his course again, but this time he did not turn in the right direction, and the change but served to confuse him when he tried to retrace his steps. As a result, he wandered away—he knew not where.

Morning came, the sun rose and the forenoon slipped away, still he wandered on and on, completely lost. He quenched his thirst at a natural spring, but water would not satisfy his hunger. Noon came and found him desperately searching after some small game that he could shoot with his revolver. He had matches and could soon build a fire and cook whatever he was fortunate enough to bring down. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks once more.

He heard voices near at hand!

Listening closely, he soon discovered that the speakers were beyond a point of rocks. Drawing a revolver, he crept forward slowly and cautiously. Before he reached the spot where he could see the speakers, he decided that one of them was a female. Soon he reached the point and peered cautiously round, only to start back with a gasp of surprise.

Before him he saw two forms, one of which was the strange girl who had stood beside him in the white midnight moonlight—the White Rose of the Sioux!

"I have found her anyway!" was Max's triumphant thought.

Bending forward, he once more peered round the point. A glance showed him that the man was dressed and painted like an Indian, but from his words the young rancher quickly decided that he was a white man thus disguised. He was speaking in an angry tone, while the maiden seemed to be listening to him with ill-disguised impatience and aversion.

"So you openly scorn me, do ye?" half-snarled the strangely-attired white man. "You had better have a care, my sweet gal! I'm a better man any day than your red lover, Black Hoss."

"Let Red Hand prove that—let him meet Black Horse and see which is the better man!" exclaimed the girl, with a scornful toss of her head.

"Oh, yes! that would be a great scheme, that would!" sneered the man. "You might be able to git rid of both of us in that way. No, I thank you!"

"Because Red Hand is a coward!" cried the White Rose. "If he did not fear Black Horse, he would meet him. I am sure that Black Horse would not hesitate."

"Oh, no! I s'pose the red cuss would like a chance to carve me up. Well, he won't git it. I am goin' to have you without fighting that red imp of Satan."

"Coward!" again broke from the girl's lips. "They call you Red Hand, but it must be because of your ability to finish those wounded by braver warriors."

"Blazes, gal! you have a sharp tongue and you know how to use it! You have learnt the language of the United States remarkably well. Say, do you know that you are not an Injun?"

"White Rose knows nothing of the kind. The Sioux are her people."

"Not a bit more'n they are mine. Gal, there ain't a drop of Injun blood in your veins. Your face is white, that is why they call you White Rose. Do you want to mate with a red skunk? No! take one of your own color! Come to me arms!"

But she started back, throwing up one hand with a gesture of warning and disgust.

"Do not dare to touch me, Red Hand! Oh, I hate the cowardly pale-face who turns from his people and joins their enemies! If White Rose is truly a pale-face, she would rather mate with Black Horse, the Sioux, than to become the squaw of the treacherous white who turned against his own people! I hate him! Red Hand had better get from the sight of the White Rose!"

"Furies!" snarled the defied wretch, his eyes flashing wickedly. "You dare much! I swear I will have you for all of Black Hoss or your hatred!"

"I do not fear you," was the calm reply. "You are a cur—a fit companion for Dingle the Desperado. His hands are red with the blood of his people!"

"You wait till he gits back—then I'll have you for all of the whole Sioux nation! I swear it, and I'll seal the oath with a kiss!"

Swift as thought, he leaped upon the maiden and caught her in his arms. She uttered a wild shriek which rung clearly through the air, but, the next instant felt herself torn from Red Hand's grasp and held close to a broad, manly bosom, while the wretch who had assaulted her lay upon his back, pinned down by Max Burke's heavy foot!

"Just in time!" half-laughed the powerful pale-face. "He would have had it in another instant—the dirty cur!"

As soon as the girl could catch her breath, so dazed was she with amazement at seeing him there, she gasped:

"Fly, fly! Crooked Eye's warriors are camped near at hand! They may come and find you any moment! They may have heard my cry! Fly, fly!"

"Come with me!" came impulsively from Max's lips. "I will take you far away—you shall become my wife! I love you!"

Speechless with surprise, the girl could not answer for a moment. Her dark face flushed with joy and her eyes fell before the ardent gaze of the hot-blooded youth. But suddenly her manner changed, and once more she cried:

"Fly, fly! you have no time to lose! It is impossible for the White Rose to go with the brave pale-face! Forget that you ever saw her. Go!"

It was high time. At that instant a dozen red warriors appeared a short distance away and came bounding toward them, uttering fierce yells.

"I will see you again, my mountain queen!" hurriedly declared the young man, with his lips close to her ear. "Till then, good-by."

But as he turned to spring away, Red Hand caught his leg and he went heavily to the ground. Then the treacherous, painted pale-face flung himself upon the fallen youth. As well might he have tried to hold a tornado! With a cry of fury, Max flung his assailant to the ground and once more started to bound away.

Too late!

There were several red-skins in front of him—they were all around him! He was surrounded by the yelling horde! There was nothing for it but to fight for life, and they gave him no time to draw a weapon, but hurled themselves straight at the big pale-face. Then it became a hand-to-hand struggle with the odds fearfully against the unfortunate white.

"Come on, you red devils!" he thundered, as he hurled them to the right and left as if they had been so many children. "You will find me a mighty hard nut to crack!"

As they leaped toward him, he dashed his heavy fists into their painted faces, sending them to the earth in a shower. With frenzied yells, they tried to fasten themselves upon him and pull him down, but as he hurled them aside, he seemed to have the warlike power of Achilles of old. His powerful arms formed a circle around him, and it seemed impossible for the Indians to remain within the limit. Back and forth went his muscular arms, and back from the telling blows reeled the reds.

Standing with clasped hands, the White Rose watched the terrific battle, her bosom rising and falling like the waters of a storm-swept lake. How grand—how noble the handsome pale-face looked as he stood there in the midst of his red foes, sweeping them down like slender trees before the breath of a tornado! How his eyes flashed and his face shone with the wild light of battle! His strength was like that of a mighty giant; that of his enemies like that of so many babes. In that terrible moment one burning thought filled her heart—how she loved him! how she loved him!

At one time it seemed as if the lone white man would vanquish his many foes; but the dastardly act of a treacherous whelp decided the struggle. Red Hand, unperceived, crept forward till he could grasp the young rancher's legs. A moment later Max was on the ground, and the band, with yells of triumph, hurled themselves upon him!

An hour later Max found himself in the Prison Lodge of a small Sioux village, bound hand and foot—a captive!

The skins which concealed the opening to the Death Lodge were lifted and Red Hand, the dastard, stood before the captive, a sneering smile of triumph marking his painted face. For a moment he regarded the brave man of his own race whom he had caused to be captured by a contemptible trick, something like a gleam of admiration showing in his eyes. Then, in a harsh, blood-chilling manner, he said:

"I've come to tell you yer doom. You're a pritty hard fighter, you are, but you've got ter go under. At sunrise to-morrow you die at the stake!"

Then he dropped the wolf-skins and left the doomed man alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER XIV.

SILENT SETH SLIPS AWAY.

A STRANGE tableau!

Three men with cocked and leveled weapons which are pointed straight at the breast of a fourth, who stands with folded arms, not a trace of fear on his dark face. On the ground another man who has started up on one elbow, a hand uplifted, crying:

"Hold—don't fire!"

Several moments of silence was broken by Montana Jim's voice:

"Ther dad-blamed outdacious critter! He deserves it, an' he'd git it ef I had my say!"

"He would make an excellent target," observed the card-sharp, coolly surveying the defiant stranger from head to foot.

"Fu'st strate," agreed Little Rocks, causing the hammer of his self-cocker to rise and fall by the pressure of his finger on the trigger.

"An' by king! I'm fer lettin' him hev it!" snapped the old prospector, pretending to be on the point of shooting.

In an instant the man who had been cast to the ground sprung up and placed himself between the threatened man and the weapons which covered him.

"If you shoot him, you will have to drop me first!" came sternly from Silent Seth's lips. "If you are friends of mine, you will put up your weapons."

Old Jim fairly gasped for breath in his amazement.

"Wa-al, did you ever!" he cried, as soon as he could command his voice. "W'y, pard, the pesky critter knocked ye down!"

"Perhaps I deserved it!" confessed the silent man. "You do not know the story of the past, and I bid you have a care not to interfere between us, even if this man sees fit to lay me dead at his feet."

"Great Scott!" gasped Little Rocks.

"A lunatic, by Jove!" said Handy Harry.

"Er blamed, thunderin' fool!" spluttered Montana Jim.

Silent Seth turned sufficiently to throw a few words over his shoulder at the man behind him, but whatever he said, the black-bearded man simply shrugged his shoulders and remained in his tracks. Seeing this, Seth once more faced his friends.

"Pards," he said, slowly and distinctly, "it may seem a singular request for me to make, but I wish you to let this man depart unmolested. He is my friend."

As he heard these words, the stranger uttered an angry cry and strode forward a pace, brushing the silent man aside with one sweep of his powerful arm.

"It is false!" he cried, hoarsely. "I am this man's deadly enemy. But for him I should not be Black Jack, the outcast—a hunted thing stained with human blood. I hate him with an undying hatred, and unless you, gentlemen, see fit to shoot me where I stand, in sudden fury as I remember the black past, I may yet take his life if he is where I can reach him!"

"Waal, I sw'ar!" snorted the veteran prospector.

"There is a confession for ye, oh my comrades!" cried the sport, assuming a tragic air.

"I reckon this hain't enny o' my funeral," muttered the little scout, as he restored his revolver to its usual resting-place.

As the man of the black beard and Silent Seth stood side by side, it was noticeable that they were remarkably alike in appearance, with the exception that one had blue eyes and a dark-brown beard, while the eyes and beard of the other were black. Had they shaved, it would have been difficult to tell one from the other save by the color of their eyes.

Black Jack, as the dark-bearded man had called himself, muttered a bitter exclamation when he saw that Silent Seth's friends had no intentions of shooting him down in cold blood. It seemed that the strange man actually courted and wished for death. Wheeling suddenly, he faced the silent man, and these words came hissing from his lips:

"Have a care if you value your life! Do not cross my path again!"

Then, without casting a single glance toward the others, he walked steadily away till a jutting spur concealed him from view.

Silent Seth stood watching the man till he was lost to sight. Even then he did not alter his position, and it was only when Montana Jim's hand fell upon his shoulder and the old prospector's voice sounded in his ear that he aroused himself.

"He's gone, pard," said Jim.

"Yes, gone!" came in a moan from Seth's lips—"gone, and still the breach is as wide as before. My God! is it to be always thus?"

The veteran's hand dropped from the silent man's shoulder, and an involuntary shudder ran over Jim's form. There was something in the despairing sound of the speaker's voice that sent a cold chill over the other.

"Who is he—w'at is he?" the old fortune-hunter ventured to ask.

Seth shook his head.

"Do not ask me, for my lips are sealed," he said.

And from that moment he would say nothing

about the strange unknown or the singularly dramatic meeting. His friends knew better than to question him, for the silent man of the past had not turned into a voluble one it was plain to see.

A consultation was held, and they arrived at a decision to move away from that place. They knew not what the stranger of the black beard might be—possibly he was an outlaw. Then there was the singular man who had called himself Captain Nameless. What was he?

"No hones' man, I'll bet a hoss!" nodded Little Rocks. "Hones' men hain't hidin' their faces ahind masks. He may take it inter his noddle ter cum back with er gang an' skoop us in. Let's git, instanter."

Rocks had no horse, but he declared that that did not make a bit of difference, for he was able to out-travel the best horse ever known, so they were soon on the move.

They had gone a little more than two miles, when, happening to glance upward, Montana Jim saw an Indian standing on a point of rocks watching them. Without pausing to think of the possible result, the old man fired, not even losing time to lift his rifle to his shoulder and take aim. But even as he touched the trigger he realized that the shot was wasted, for the red-skin leaped back and disappeared. Jim uttered an exclamation of disappointment and dismay.

"Durn ther luck!"

In a moment his companions were eager to know what he had fired at, and in a few words he told them. Rocks shook his head gravely, a troubled look on his face.

"Thet's bad," he said. "Thet red hes friends nigh, I'm bettin'. We're mighty apt ter git inter er blessed predickymint before soon. Hang tight ter yer skulps, pards, an' keep yer weather eye peeled fer yarthquakes."

They hurried along as fast as they could, wishing to get out of the ravine as soon as possible, for they knew that they could be taken at a disadvantage there if their red foes came upon them.

"I tell you ther skunks are thick in this yere region," said the little scout, as he ran easily along by the side of Montana's horse. "You fellers hev cum ter er mighty bad section ter hunt for er forchune. You're a blamed sight more apt ter find graves in these maountings."

"I dunno but you're right," acknowledged the old prospector. "Thar seems ter be all kinds o' critters ermung these ravines an' gulches. I didn't spect ter fine er hooman critter but ourselves w'en we got hyer."

They had not proceeded far from the place where Jim fired at the Indian when of a sudden a dusky form sprung out into their path, flinging up its hands, one of which held a rifle, and crying:

"Don't shoot! Me friend—me Hawk Eye!"

It was an Indian!

The next moment Little Rocks exclaimed:

"Easy, pards! He's givin' it straight! He is Hawk Eye, ther friendly Crow; I know him."

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian. "Me know Little Fire-hand. Him much brave pale-face! Old Quick-shot 'most shoot Hawk Eye."

By this he evidently referred to Montana Jim, and in a moment the entire party understood the red at whom the old prospector had fired was before them.

"By gum, Injun," said the veteran of the mines, "I reckon I did cum pritty tarnal near borin' ye, but I hadn't an ijee thet you might be a friendly."

"Hawk Eye friend," the red once more asserted. "Him goin' to call pale-faces when Old Quick-shot fire."

After a few moments, they moved on again, the friendly Crow running lightly along by the scout's side and keeping up the conversation by asking innumerable questions, nearly all of which Rocks saw fit to answer truthfully, for he knew that the red could be trusted.

Finally, the mouth of the ravine was reached and the party came to a halt. Then it was that a startling discovery was made.

Silent Seth was not with them!

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN NAMELESS LEADS A CHARGE.

THE silent man had strangely disappeared; but why had he left them in such an unaccountable manner?

"Durn my eyesight!" grunted old Jim. "Ef thet hain't one way o' treatin' pards!"

"I should say so!" chimed in Handy Harry. "Why the fellow didn't even stop for a parting embrace. It must be that urgent business called him away."

"Oh, confound your banter!" growled Jim.

"Can't you never look at northin' ser'usly?"

"Bet your ducats!" was the reply. "If I never look at northin' it will be very ser'usly. It would be a very serious thing for a fellow to stand and never look at nothing. James, old man, you may not be a grammarian, but I grip your meaning just as hard."

"But, whar's Seth?"

"You tell."

"He wuz with us w'en Hawk Eye appeared," asserted Little Rocks. "I saw him then."

The Indian nodded and declared that there

had been another in the party when he joined them.

"I can't jest understan' it," and the old prospector shook his head gravely. "Thar wusn't no reason why he sh'd slip away in sech a manner. W'at fer did he do it?"

"Perhaps he went to look for his friend of the flowing black beard," ventured the card-sharp.

"Durned likely!" snapped the prospector, with a sniff of contempt.

"It is not posserble that ennythin' hes happened ter him," observed the scout.

"Course not," agreed Jim. "He left us o' his own accord, but w'at he dun et fer is w'at gits me."

For several minutes they discussed the puzzling occurrence, but they could decide on no possible motive that would lead their comrade to leave them in such an unaccountable manner. Finally, they decided to go forward a short distance and wait a while to see if the missing one would not join them.

"He may have lagged behind an' will overtake us," said Jim, casting a glance over his shoulder, as if he half-expected to see the silent man coming as they moved away.

In a place chosen by Little Rocks—a sort of natural fortification—they halted. Half an hour passed, but Seth did not appear.

"I reckon he has given us the cold shake," laughed Handy Harry who was killing time by smoking a cigarette.

"It looks thet way," Montana Jim acknowledged; "but hanged ef I don't bate ter think et o' him!"

"There is probly suthin' beneath all this thet you fellers don't know northin' 'bout," said the little scout. "I am sure thet his sudden disappearance wuz caused by his meetin' with thet galoot o' ther black whiskers. Thar'll be blood spilt of them two meet erg'in."

"I'm erfraid you're right," sighed the veteran fortune-hunter. "Thet man confessed thet his han's wuz stained with blood a'ready, an' I sh'd hate like p'isen ter hev him git arter me with them black eyes glarin' ez they did w'en he jumped onter Seth."

"Oh, he is a bad man from 'way up," nodded the sport, sending out a succession of smoke-rings. "When he lifts the hatchet and takes to the war-path, there is trouble, you bet!"

"Blue Eyes no come; Injun go find im," said the friendly, suddenly arising to his feet.

"Jest ther thing!" cried Rocks. "Hawk Eye is a great trailer, and can find your missin' pard ef he kin be foun'."

"Hawk Eye find 'um," nodded the red.

After a short consultation, it was decided that the best thing they could do was to let Hawk Eye take the trail of their missing comrade. They felt sure that the Indian would find the lost one if he could be found, and he could bring them word as to Seth's fate. If the silent man had voluntarily deserted them, they felt that it was useless to attempt to get him to join them again until he saw fit to do so, but they would feel better if they knew just what had become of him.

They watched Hawk Eye till he disappeared at a trot back into the ravine.

"Thar goes ther whitest red-skin I ever knew," said Little Rocks, nodding toward the receding form. "He is as true as steel and a mighty good fighter, you bet!"

"Then he's jest ther man we want with us ef we git inter tr'ubble with ther redimps," laughed Jim. "One good man has left us; we need another to fill his place."

"Waal, w'en et comes ter fightin', thet red will more'n fill tber place o' t'other 'un. He goes inter er scrimmage tooth an' claw, hot an' heavy. They has ter git out o' his way w'en he gits ter b'ilin'."

"A sort of cyclone on trucks, I should infer," drawled Harry, yawning.

"Jest erbout that," was the reply.

"That is the kind of timber I tie to. If a man has got any fight in him he wants lots of it. If there is anything that I hate it is to see a sleepy man in a fight."

Slowly the time dragged away, but still the red did not return. The waiting men grew impatient at the delay. The sun mounted higher and higher in the heavens and Montana Jim began to fume and fret.

"Keep cool, pard," advised Rocks. "Hawk Eye will show up afore long, I reckon."

The scout was right. Nearly two hours after his departure the friendly reappeared, a strange look on his face, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Did ye fine him?" cried Montana Jim, starting up.

Hawk Eye shook his head.

"No find blue-eyed pale-face," he replied "Heap bad trail. Injun would found him, but found somethin' else."

"What's thet?"

"Injun found white gal."

In an instant the three men were on their feet, pager with excitement.

"W'at's thet?" Little Rocks demanded. "You have found a white gal? Where?"

"Yes, spit it out lively!" spluttered the old prospector. "Whar is she?"

"White gal captive."

"What!" exclaimed the three, in chorus.

"White gal prisoner," repeated the red.

"Bad white men got her."

The scout uttered something that sounded strangely like a smothered oath.

"Then she fell inter Buck Dingle's han's erg'in las' nite!" he cried. "All my work was fer northin'!"

"But she must be reskied erg'in!" burst from the old prospector's lips.

"Right you are, James," nodded Handy Harry. "We must away to the rescue!"

"Hawk Eye can lead you!" declared the red-skin.

"Good!" nodded old Jim. "Lead on, Injun; we'll foller."

A few moments later they started, Jim and Harry mounted, the red and the scout on foot. At the end of thirty minutes Hawk Eye halted, saying:

"Must leave hosses here. We go up there; hosses can't go. Hide hosses."

After the animals were concealed where they thought they would not be found by any prowling red-skin or outlaw, they followed the friendly up a steep and difficult ascent. For at least two miles he led them over broken ground and along dangerous paths. Finally he turned and made a gesture of warning.

"Most there," pointing ahead. "See smoke?"

Following the direction indicated by his hand, they saw a small column of smoke slowly rising into the air.

"Bad pale-faces and white gal there," declared the Indian.

A short time later the four men were amid some bushes close to the brink of a precipice, peering down into a small mountain pocket, in the midst of which a fire was burning. Gathered in several groups around this fire and in different parts of the pocket were more than twenty men, one half of whom were Indians. Among the whites, Dingle, the Desperado was prominent, making it evident that he was the leader of the party. He had been joined by his followers who had not accompanied him on his marauding expedition into Montana, an expedition which had cost him three of his most valuable men.

Two or three of the men were attending to the horses, which were gathered at one side of the pocket. Others were cleaning their weapons, playing cards or telling stories. The Indians were reclining on the ground in various attitudes of lazy abandon, smoking, sleeping or idly watching those around them. One red was broiling some meat on the hot coals which he had raked from the fire.

It was indeed a picturesque scene.

"Can ye see ennythin' o' ther gal?" whispered Montana Jim in the ear of his nearest companion, who happened to be the little scout.

"Yes," was the low reply; "thar she is over by them rocks guarded by one big galoot. Can't ye see her?"

"I see her now; but how in ther name o' sin are we goin' ter git her out o' thet?"

"Guv it up, pard."

"We mus' fine er way!"

"We will!"

At this moment there was a sudden commotion in the little pocket. A man came running in from the north side and fired his rifle into the air, at the same time yelling some words which the men who were watching from the height could not understand. In an instant outlaws and Indians leaped to their feet as if electrified and began to run in all directions, the most of them starting toward the horses. Conspicuous in all this excitement was Buck Dingle, who roared out a few hoarse commands and then began to swear furiously at the frightened men, who appeared to be panic-stricken.

"Great Moses!" gasped Montana Jim, starting up in excitement. "W'at's thet mean?"

As if in answer came the cry from one of the outlaws, who was hastening toward the horses:

"The soldiers! the soldiers! Run, run!"

And then into the pocket from the north pass swept a band of blue-coated horsemen, from whose throats came a ringing cheer as they bore down upon the dismayed gang that had been gathered around the fire.

But, they were not soldiers. Every man wore a mask over his face, and at their head, mounted on a milk-white horse, rode the strange man who called himself Captain Nameless. The mysterious man of the mountains sat on his steed like a veritable Centaur, appearing a part of the animal itself, for the bridle-rein lay untouched upon the horse's neck, its master guiding the intelligent animal by the pressure of his knees. In each of the blue-coated chief's hands gleamed a revolver, and the seven men at his back were armed in a similar manner. Without slackening the pace of their animals, the Blue Coats opened fire, sending a perfect hail-storm of bullets into the mass of yelling outlaws and Indians.

The battle—if battle it could be called, for the outlaws and Indians fired but a few shots in return—was brief. Dingle's men and his red allies had been thrown into consternation by the report that a band of soldiers was coming, and they did not recover before Captain Name-

less had accomplished his purpose and was away.

Straight toward the spot where stood the captive maiden—Viona having sprung to her feet at the first alarm—swept the leader of the Blue Coats, causing his horse to slacken its pace a little as he came nearer. The revolvers had disappeared and Captain Nameless's hands were empty. As he reached the girl he bent, caught her in his arms and swung her up in front of him.

Then, with a parting cheer of triumph, the strange band fired one more volley, and wheeled sharply around to follow their chief out of the pocket.

CHAPTER XVI.

"YOU BLASTED MY LIFE!"

BLACK JACK, the man of the raven beard, hurried away with a nervous, excited step after leaving the camp of the fortune-hunters, where had occurred such a dramatic scene. His strong hands were tightly clinched and his dark face was marked by a look of passion that was terrible in its intensity.

"Let him have a care to keep out of my path!" he fiercely hissed. "Next time I may not be able to control myself when I see him lying at my feet. Then—God have mercy on him!"

Onward he hurried, seeming to have a certain point in view as his destination. He knew the path well, for not once did he hesitate or turn back. Black Jack was familiar with the mountain gulches and the natural thoroughfares in that vicinity.

"What will she say when I tell her who I have seen?" he muttered. "She will look at my hands to see if they are stained again, for she knows my fiery heart. But the old red stain on my accursed hands is not covered by a new one and I have not still another crime to answer for."

For more than an hour he hurried on. Finally, he halted with a low exclamation of surprise and wonder, for at that instant a human being—a young man with bloodstained features—had broken from the bushes directly ahead of him and started on a run down the slope. The youthful stranger carried a rifle, but was hatless and apparently greatly excited. As he ran down the slope, Black Jack noticed that he seemed to stagger with weakness.

"Who in the name of the wonderful is that?" exclaimed the dark-faced man. "He appears like a crazy person and his head and face are covered with blood. Evidently he has met with some kind of a misfortune. But strangest of all, he came out of the bushes there, and if he came from the other side, he must have been at the place where the path leads down into the pocket. By gracious! it may be that he came from the pocket! What if something has happened to Lyla!"

Hurriedly he plunged into the bushes and a few moments later was descending the dangerous path with a rapidity born of long familiarity with that method of getting down into the pocket where lay the hidden hut beneath the overhanging cliff. Soon he reached the bottom and hurried toward the screen of vines, beyond which he could see the open door of the cabin. When he had passed beneath the vines, he halted and peered in at the door.

"She is there," he said, softly, with a breath of relief.

Yes, the white-haired woman was there, sitting on the low couch with her face buried in her hands and her snowy tresses falling all around her head and shoulders, slowly rocking sideways and muttering unintelligible words. But that was not all the man beyond the doorway saw. Lying on the floor was a bullet-pierced hat, and scarce a foot from the hat was a pool of blood.

What did it mean?

"Lyla!"

Black Jack stood within the cabin. The woman started up, throwing back her hair and fixing her eyes on his face. Then she uttered a cry and sprung forward.

"John, is it you?"

"Yes, I am back again."

"But too late! too late!" she moaned, wringing her hands.

"Too late?" he cried, grasping her arm.

"Why too late? What do you mean?"

The woman cast a swift glance around the cabin.

"They are gone!" she gasped.

"Gone—who? Who has been here—who has dared?"

"One was a beautiful girl. I found her all alone in the darkness not so very far away, and I brought her here. Another was her lover who found her here. Then came another—Dingle, the outlaw!"

"Gods!" burst from Black Jack's lips. "Has that dastard found this spot? Then no longer will we be safe here!"

"Yes, he came. He found the lovers in each other's arms, and, like the wretch that he is, he shot the young man down and carried away the girl, leaving me bound to this couch. I thought the young man dead, for he lay still—oh, so still!—there on the floor, and that pool of blood formed beside his head. But he was not dead—"

he was simply stunned by the bullet which plowed along his skull, and after a time, he revived and released me. When I told him what had become of the girl, he rushed forth in pursuit of the outlaw."

"I saw him," nodded the man.

"But that is not all who have been here!" cried the woman of the snow-white hair, glaring into his face with sudden wildness. "There was another—another—a man with a horribly deformed body—a man with claw-like hands and hideous, scarred face! Oh! he was terrible to see! That face—those hands! John Drake, those scars were made by fire!"

"Heavens!" gasped the man, his dark face becoming almost as white as the woman's hair.

"He came and stood before me, while his burning eyes seemed to sink into my very soul!" she continued, growing still wilder. "He called me by my name! He spoke of the past—the bitter, black past! He called me by my name!"

Black Jack reeled back a step, a hunted look filling his face and eyes. He seemed too shocked and astounded to speak.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the woman of the hidden hut. "You quail! I could have dropped dead before those terrible eyes! His voice—John Drake, his voice was the voice of the dead!"

A groan broke from his lips and he covered his face with his hands, while his whole form shook with a tempest of emotion. Still that shrill voice went on:

"This strange creature of the deformed body and fire-scarred face told me that he had been searching for me—searching for years—for me and the other! He spoke of the night that you and I had fled into the darkness, leaving a knife in the breast of a man who lay in the burning house behind us! He pointed at the lines in my face and the snow-white hair, and said that my signs of suffering did not tell what he had endured—he had passed through the fires infernal! I cried out: 'Who are you?' Then he clutched my wrist and, with his eyes burning into my very heart, hissed a name in my ear!"

"What name?" gasped the shaken man.

"Rupert Weston's!"

With a groan, Black Jack reeled back against the wall, to which he tried to cling for support. He appeared at that moment very little like the powerful, passion-swayed man who had hurled Silent Seth to the ground. For several minutes he stood there, gradually regaining his strength and composure. Finally, he uttered a feeble laugh and declared:

"Rupert Weston is dead!"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Sure—yes!" holding out his right hand with a look of repulsion on his face. "Did not that accursed hand drive a knife straight into his heart?"

"Dead or living," moaned the woman, "by that blow you blasted my life!"

"And my own as well. A curse has been on me ever since! Better had I driven the blade into my own heart!"

"Or mine! What misery I have endured since that hour! And now, like one from the dead, comes this scarred creature to torture and mock me!"

"I was driven to that dreadful deed," feebly protested the man. "For another's crime I was hunted like a dog! And this very day have I stood face to face with that other."

"What—not Seth?"

"Yes, Seth. He is here amid these mountains. I have seen him and he has felt my strength, for I hurled him down at my feet!"

"You did not kill him?"

"No, I do not come to you with more blood on my hands. I did not kill him, although I was strongly tempted to do so. I warned him to have a care to shun me, for he might not escape the next time."

"Why is he here?"

"I know not, but he said he had been searching for me."

"For you?"

"So he said."

"And he found you."

"He did, but I do not think he will try to find me again. He was warned."

For several moments there was silence in the hidden hut, then the woman came forward and laid her hand on the arm of her companion.

"John."

"Yes, Lyla."

"I have a request to make."

"What is it? You know that I will do anything for you. It is my duty."

"I want you to go and find the scar-faced man!"

He shrank away with a gasp.

"Will you go?" she demanded, not appearing to notice his fear.

"What can you want of him?"

"I want to learn the truth—I want to tell him the truth. Will you go?"

"Yes; but I may not be able to bring him here."

"Do your best; it is all I can ask."

"I will." And without another word, he wheeled and left the cabin beneath the cliff.

The woman went back to the couch and buried her face in her hands. Looking back

through the open door, Black Jack saw her thus, and with a pitying light in his eyes, he muttered:

"Poor Lyla! her reason was fearfully shaken by that black night's work."

CHAPTER XVII.

DONE IN THE DARKNESS.

WHEN Victor Leclair climbed panting up the path out of the pocket where lay the hidden hut, burst through the bushes on reaching the top, and dashed madly down the slope, he was so blinded by rage and excitement that he failed to see Black Jack, who was standing in full view. When he recovered, after being shot down by Big Buck and lying so long senseless on the floor of the cabin beneath the cliff, he was partially dazed by the terrible shock which the bullet gave him; but on releasing the woman from the cords which bound her to the cot and hearing from her lips that the wretch who had attempted to murder him had carried Viona away, he remembered everything that had occurred up to the time that Dingle pulled trigger with murderous intent. Then he reeled back, glaring round the cabin and hoarsely calling the name of his loved one. But she was gone—she was in the power of a merciless and unscrupulous desperado whose dastardly deeds had made him famous throughout the Territory! Great heavens! what a terrible fate might be hers!

"I will save her or die!" he cried, and, seizing his rifle, he bounded from the cabin.

He could not remember how he managed to scramble up that dangerous path—he could not remember of bursting through the bushes and bounding down the slope, staggering like a wounded deer that hears the hunter's hounds baying on its track, but with his eyes flashing like those of an enraged lion. He scarcely knew what he was doing till he found himself far from the secluded pocket, quite exhausted by his rapid run. Then he was forced to sit down and regain his breath.

"Oh, my darling!" he moaned; "I have found you but to lose you again. Fate seems very cruel to tear us asunder thus. But I will find you again—I must! If I only knew which way to turn!"

But he did not. There were a hundred ways for Dingle to carry his fair captive, and he realized that it would depend very much upon chance whether he found her again or not. At the same time, he could not bear the thought of failure.

"Something will lead me to her," he told himself again and again. "I will yet be able to wrest her from that dastard's hands and we will find happiness in the future—But which way shall I turn now?"

He finally decided to go back to the horses and see if Max had not returned, for together they could prosecute the search much better, and two could hope to succeed much more surely in rescuing the lost maiden than one alone.

Without a great deal of difficulty he succeeded in returning to the spot where he had concealed the horses, but to his disappointment, he found that Max had not been there. This puzzled him greatly, for there seemed to be no good reason for his friend's prolonged absence. He began to fear that something serious had happened to Max.

"I am sure," he muttered, "that, unless something had happened to him, he would not remain away like this. The greatest puzzle is what caused him to leave me at all without even saying a word. The only explanation is that he went in search of that strange girl, and that is scarcely an explanation, for I do not think Max would indulge in such folly. Well, sure it is that he is gone, and I will have to search for Viona alone. I will leave him a line, so that, if he does return while I am gone, he will know what has happened and why I am away."

Once more he wrote a short note on a leaf of the blank book and left it where he thought his comrade would be sure to find it. He saw that the horses were all right, bathed his aching head in the cool water from the spring and bound his handkerchief around it, then, with one farewell glance around, walked swiftly away.

Victor knew not which way to go and chance led him almost in the footsteps of his missing friend; but it happened that, instead of making so many twists and turns as Max had done, he followed a more direct course, and, by a rare chance, he was looking down into the little valley where lay Crooked Eye's village at the very time the yelling, triumphant red-skins came dragging their recently captured prisoner into the place.

"Some poor devil has fallen into their hands," soliloquized Victor, taking good care to keep himself concealed from view. "His doom is sealed."

Suddenly he caught a familiar look about the proud, fearless bearing of the prisoner, and he bent forward, holding his breath and fixing his eyes on the unfortunate Sioux captive. Then it was with difficulty that he choked down a cry of horror and dismay, and with dry lips he gasped:

"Great God! it is Max!"

He watched the yelling fiends lead the captive toward the Death Lodge, and his blood boiled with fury as he saw them dance around the young man and strike him again and again. He saw the women come out and revile the unfortunate man, and for the time his fingers itched to get at the throat of the fiendish hags. A sigh of relief came from his lips when he saw his friend thrust into the lodge set apart for captives.

"This is terrible!" he softly groaned, as he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. "How in the world can I aid him? I know nothing about the red devils and their methods; if I were a border scout or hunter, I might creep into that village and release him when night comes, but should I attempt it now, the chances are that it would simply seal my fate as well as his."

For a long time he lay thinking, thinking. His head was still throbbing with a dull, heavy pain, but he thought nothing of that—did not even notice it. His one thought was how he could extricate his friend from the dreadful predicament, for he had determined not to leave Max to his fate. He would try to save him, even if he were captured in the act. Finally a sudden thought came to him.

Viona might be down there!

He reasoned that, without Doubt, Dingle and his followers were leagued with the Indians, and that being the case, why should not the desperado bring his fair captive to the red-man's village?

"It is possible," he thought; "and, should fortune favor me, I may be able to release them both. If I fail—"

He did not complete the sentence, for he knew quite well what failure meant.

All the remainder of that long, dreary day he lay there in his place of concealment, forming and abandoning plans by the score. Several times he came near being discovered by some moving red, but fortune favored him each time, and the warrior passed on, unaware of the presence of a foe who watched his movements with a pair of keen, piercing eyes. It was lucky, too, for the Indians that none of them discovered the hidden white, for it would have meant death to the one who made the discovery.

Night came at last. Slowly the sun sank behind the peaks which seemed to loom above the very head of the hungry pale-face who lay watching Crooked Eye's village. The western sky was suffused with purple and gold, crimson and sapphire, but Victor had no eyes for the beauty of the sunset. He only prayed for darkness, darkness. And slowly at first, but with gathering swiftness, his prayer was answered, till at length night shut down like the closing of a dungeon door.

With considerable satisfaction Victor saw that the sky would be partially overcast by scudding clouds, broken only at occasions by rifts of moonlight. In fact, it would be a comparatively dark night. He knew that the darkness would favor him, for he would not be so apt to be seen; the occasional rifts of light would also favor him, for they would enable him to see where he was going. But he knew that he would have to be careful not to let the light betray him.

His greatest fear was of the dogs which he had heard yelping round the village, for he knew that they might scent him out and raise an alarm. But, if a hundred dogs blocked his path, he would make the attempt; his mind was made up.

Slowly the hours slipped away, but the young lawyer lay still in his place of concealment and listened, having resolved not to make a move till near midnight. At last, when he was about to start on the perilous expedition, he heard light footsteps approaching, and two shadowy figures paused in the gloom not ten feet from where he lay. Inwardly the young man uttered an imprecation. Then, to his surprise, the two persons began to converse in whispers, and in a language which he well understood, nearly every word of which he could plainly hear.

"The white brave is free now. He can go to his people. When the sun rises again the red-men will look in vain for their captive."

The speaker was evidently a female.

"They will be apt to raise a holy howl when they find the warrior who was set to guard the prisoner lying dead within the prison-lodge. Ah, White Rose! it was fortunate that you smuggled that knife in to me. But for that, I should not have been able to escape, although you laid your plans well. I have you to thank for my freedom—for my life!"

"Say nothing of that. The White Rose would do even more—she would give up her life for the pale brave who would have conquered a dozen red warriors but for the treachery of one of his own race! He is a mighty warrior!"

"Well, I reckon I did give the copper-colored rascals some fun for a few minutes. The fighting blood of the Burkes was boiling in my veins at that moment."

Victor could scarcely restrain his delight. The White Rose's companion was indeed his friend Max, whom the noble-hearted girl had aided to escape from the clutches of the red fiends. Hugging himself with delight, the

young lawyer listened yet a little longer before making his presence known.

"But the pale-face must hurry away," said the strange girl of the Sioux. "His escape will be discovered, and then he will be in danger."

"And you, my little queen—what of you?"

"I will go back to my people," was the sad reply.

"Your people! Bosh! You are no red-skin! White Rose, you are not going back to the red whelps! What if they discovered that you aided me to escape?"

"I would be slain."

"Well, you're not going into any such danger—you hear me!"

"Where else can the White Rose go?"

"Come with me! I will take you to the people with whom you really belong. Rose, I love you—I will make you my wife, if you will have me!"

At this point, with a great deal of difficulty, Victor twisted round so that he could obtain a better view of the figures. He saw his friend slowly drawing the maiden toward him, while she appeared to hang back shyly.

"Oh, but can the grand pale-face mean that? No, no! He has not counted his words. He would not mate with the wild maiden of the mountains—she is not fit for such as him!"

"Not fit!" burst in a hoarse whisper from the lips of the hot-blooded young fellow. "She is fit for the greatest man that ever breathed! Not fit—and she risked her life to save mine! Rose, listen, for I speak the truth when I swear by all that I hold dear that if you fly with me I will marry you as soon as possible after we reach civilization! You shall surely be my wife in time. I love you with my heart, soul and body! Do you not love me a little in return?"

Faintly the unseen listener heard the reply:

"The pale brave is bold, noble and good—the White Rose loves him!"

The next moment the strange maiden was locked in the arms of the strong young rancher and he was covering her lips with kisses. At this point, Victor said, in a low tone:

"That will do, Max!"

The effect was electrical. The lovers fell apart as if shot, and a revolver gleamed in the young rancher's hand.

"Hold your horses, old man," said the one on the ground. "Don't shoot! It is I—Victor."

A moment later, the two friends were shaking hands heartily, having great difficulty in restraining their delight. But they all realized that they were in constant danger, and therefore they made no further delay in getting away from that locality.

The maiden took the lead, for she knew the country quite well and they hurried away. On, on they went till at last they were beginning to congratulate themselves on their good fortune in getting away without being discovered, when the girl suddenly gave a low hiss. Instantly comprehending her meaning, they sunk silently to the ground.

A moment later the dark figure of an Indian warrior appeared in the gloom close at hand!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY—GONE!

WITHOUT the least hesitation, the White Rose hurried forward and met the warrior, who could not repress a grunt of surprise and delight at seeing her there at that time of the night. One glance showed the maiden that the Indian who had appeared at such an unfortunate moment was her red lover, Black Horse. This discovery filled her with dismay, for she knew that she would be liable to have more trouble in avoiding him than she would were it any other from Crooked Eye's village, excepting Red Hand.

Upon perceiving who it was that confronted him, the red-skin said in the Sioux language, a suspicious inflection in his voice:

"The White Rose wanders far in the darkness."

"Yes," she instantly replied in the same tongue; "but she did not think of meeting Black Horse here. Does he never sleep?"

"Black Horse is always watchful. But what is the White Rose doing here at such a time?"

"Who gave the broad-handed brave the right to question the movements of the White Rose?"

"His heart," was the quick retort.

The maiden uttered a word of contempt.

"Black Horse presumes too much. Let him stand aside that the White Rose may pass."

"Where would she go?"

"Let Black Horse discover—if he can."

"He will go with her."

"His company is not wanted. Let him go to another who cares to see him more than the White Rose—let him go to Laughing Water."

"His heart cares nothing for the red maiden of his tribe; it longs for the adopted one who came from the land of the pale-faces."

The girl started forward with a quick exclamation.

"So even Black Horse confesses that the White Rose is not one of his race! Ah! she believes it at last! Let the red warrior stand aside that the stolen maiden may return to her own people!"

Then she attempted to push past him, but he blocked the path and caught her in his arms.

"Would the White Rose desert the people who have been everything to her? Black Horse thought so, and he caught her with a trick. She shall go back to Crooked Eye's village and become Black Horse's squaw. He claims her, and he will have her or die!"

"The broad-handed brave is a coward!" panted the girl, struggling to free herself from that odious embrace. "The broad-handed brave! Bah! he is no brave—he is a squaw!"

"The White Rose dares much to call Black Horse that to his face, but he will have his revenge when she sits in his wigwam. He will."

But the red-skin's words ended in a gasp, for he felt an iron grasp at his throat. He tried to utter a cry, but the fierce clutch on his windpipe shut off every sound. He struggled, but a strong arm was clasped around him holding him fast.

"Hurry, Victor!" hoarsely whispered the young rancher, who was the Indian lover's assailant. "Look out that the red dog doesn't get at his knife! Tie his hands behind his back, while I keep my grip on his windpipe. Then we'll have to gag him and tie his feet. Work quick!"

The young lawyer was at work all the time and his movements were remarkably swift. In a very brief space of time the red-man's hands were secured, and then, as rapidly as he could in the darkness, Victor fashioned a rude gag. This was slipped between the jaws of the nearly unconscious Indian and made fast, then his feet were bound together.

"There," said Max, as he swiftly inspected the warrior's condition, "I think he will remain quiet for a time, at least. We shall have plenty of start. Come on."

The maiden had been standing calmly watching their movements and keeping her ears open for any unusual sound. She now took the lead again and they hurried away.

"That was slickly done, old man," complimented Victor in his friend's ear. "I trembled lest the red should discover you when you were creeping upon him."

"He was too busy talking," laughed the brawny young rancher. "Rose saw me coming and kept him still busier. She worked up that little piece of excitement in fine shape."

Away through the night flitted the three. As soon as they were at a safe distance from the Indian village, Victor told Max of his adventures, how he had found Viona and how he had lost her. Max was greatly excited by the recital.

"She shall be found again, Vic!" he declared. "We will tear her from the grasp of the desperado chief!"

"I did not know but he carried her to the Indian village where you were a prisoner," said the young lawyer.

"No, it cannot be! Rose would have known it and told me if a white maiden had been brought into the village."

The girl had heard their words and she turned her head to say:

"The bad white chief has not come to Crooked Eye's village, but he is not many miles away. He is camped somewhere near with his men and some of Cloud-on-the-Moon's warriors. You will surely be able to find the place."

When they were far from the village, they paused and discussed the situation. Where should they go to be in a place of safety while they remained in that vicinity searching for Viona? They must have a place of retreat somewhere—a place that would not be easily discovered by the Indians, who, they knew, would be on their trail at daylight. Finally, the girl said:

"I know the very place—a cave not very far from where you were last night. But we must break our trail so that the red-men will not be able to follow us there. There is food in the cave—some that was placed there not long ago by a warrior who is dead now. But a few of the Indians know of the cave."

"A good place then," observed Victor. "The mention of food makes me hungry, for I have not tasted a morsel since morning."

As instructed by the girl, they began to carefully conceal their trail. Finally they reached a small stream of water which came from a narrow rift in a mountain-side. Into this the girl promptly stepped, bidding the others follow her, and disappeared into the darkness of the rift. Max followed close behind their fair guide, and Victor came close at the young rancher's heels. The water was not over six inches deep in any place.

They did not follow the stream far before the girl turned into an opening in the wall at her left. They followed her as closely as they could in the Stygian darkness. Finally she paused and asked if either of them had a match. In a moment Max placed the desired article in her fingers.

"Now we will have light," she said, and in a few seconds a pitch-pine torch illumined the cave.

Once more they followed her onward and soon found themselves in a small side chamber. They looked around and saw a few wolf-skins scattered on the floor, a rude couch on the ground at one side and some wood piled into what appeared to be a natural fire-place. In this surmisal they

were right, for the girl advanced and thrust her torch into the mass, causing it to burst into flame, illuminating the chamber and rapidly filling it with a comfortable feeling of warmth.

"This is grand!" cried Victor, in ecstasy, flinging himself down upon the skins near the fire. "Now for the hash!"

"And then for the horses and my rifle!" said Max.

It was not long before the two young men had satisfied their hunger on such coarse food as the maiden was able to find in the place. Then Victor arose and announced his readiness to go for the horses. After the girl had assured them a dozen times that she did not mind being left alone in the cave and Victor had left his friend with her several minutes, they started.

"I think I can go directly to the spot where the horses are," said the young lawyer, as they waded down the stream. "It is not far from here."

"I hope we shall find them as you left them. Rose succeeded in getting hold of my revolvers, but I want to get my fingers on my rifle once more. If the horses are all right and we are fortunate in finding and rescuing Viona, we will soon leave these mountains far behind."

When they left the fissure Victor took the lead because he felt so sure that he knew the direct course to the horses. For more than half-an-hour they pressed forward. Suddenly Max halted, saying softly:

"Hark!"

They both listened, and in a few moments they heard a hollow groan near at hand.

"What does that mean?" asked Victor, in a whisper.

"It sounds like some one in distress," was the reply; "and it is close by."

"It may be a trick."

"I don't think so. Anyway, I am going to investigate." Revolver in hand, he went slowly toward the spot from whence came the sound. He did not take many steps before he discerned a dark form lying on the ground. In a moment both of the young men were bending over the unfortunate, who appeared to be in pain and nearly unconscious.

"Wonder who it is?" said Max.

"I don't know; some poor devil probably who got hurt in some way—probably was knifed or shot."

"The wound appears to be upon his head. I would like to have a look at his features."

At this moment the moon suddenly shone out from behind a cloud and the young rancher obtained what he desired. He started back with a cry of amazement and incredulity.

"Great heaven! my father!"

"You are right," said Victor, who was also astounded at the discovery. "It is surely your father."

"But how came he here?"

"He must have followed us."

"We left him nearly broken down by what he had passed through. I cannot understand it."

"There is no time for wonder now. He is hurt and we must get him to the cave where he can be attended to. The wound is on his head. I have examined it as well as I can in the darkness, and I do not think it a serious one. The only thing that troubles me is how we shall get him to the cave."

For reply, Max lifted the groaning man in his arms and started to return, saying:

"Come."

Victor followed and rendered such assistance as the young rancher would permit, and in that way they got along very well. Max was forced to stop to rest several times, but his strength was remarkable. The dark cleft was finally reached and they waded up the stream and entered the cave. Max called to Rose several times, but there was no answer. Within the inner chamber they found the fire still burning brightly, but the girl whom they had left there a short time before was gone!

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT BEFELL VIONA.

LIKE a whirlwind Captain Nameless and his blue-coated followers swept down upon the panic-stricken outlaws and red-kins in the little mountain pocket, and almost before the red and white marauders realized that they were not really attacked by a squadron of cavalry, the mysterious chief of the mountain masks had seized Viona Burke in his arms and dashed out of the pocket with his men at his heels. It was the daring act of a daring man whose followers were as brave as himself.

When Buck Dingle saw Captain Nameless galloping away with the girl in his arms, the notorious outlaw became so furious that he danced up and down in a perfect frenzy of rage, hurled his empty revolvers after the retreating Blue Coats, and swore till he was purple in the face, and so hoarse that he could scarcely utter an intelligible word. The desperado leader little dreamed what a ridiculous figure he cut as he pranced around in a manner that would have put an Italian organ-grinder's monkey to shame, swearing, frothing and snarling like some infuriated beast. His satellites took good care to keep safely beyond his reach, and the villain's insane

fury spoiled all chance of recovering possession of the captive, for the Blue Coats were far away before Big Buck cooled enough to think of pursuit.

Straight away through the pass rode the strange band of rescuers, following their mysterious leader in grim silence. Only once did Captain Nameless speak to the fair white-faced girl whom he held in his arms, and then he simply bade her not be frightened as she would not be harmed. Viona wondered into whose hands she had fallen, half-fearing that her condition had not improved, a fear that was intensified by the sight of the masks which all the Blue Coats wore. It is but natural to think that men who hide their faces are not honest.

Soon the masked riders came to where the pass divided, and without an instant's hesitation, they turned into the narrow opening that led to the right. They seemed to know their way well, for not a word passed between them, and every man seemed to rein his horse at the same instant.

Viona soon grew tired of trying to keep track of their windings, as they turned to the right and left in their course away through the gorges and ravines. Finally as they were passing down a narrow, canyon-like ravine, a man arose in their path, and, with his rifle leveled straight at them, called out for them to halt. The man who had so suddenly appeared was dressed and masked the same as those on the horses, and it was at that very point that Captain Nameless had halted Max Burke and Victor Leclair, as has been related.

As soon as the man with the rifle appeared, Captain Nameless made a few mysterious passes with his right hand, and immediately the sentinel saluted and sunk from sight. Then the Blue Coats rode on.

From that point the ravine grew narrower and plunged downward at an alarming angle, making it difficult for the horses to keep their feet. But the animals had passed over that steep road many times and they knew the ground well. Gradually the walls on either side seemed to creep together overhead and slowly it became darker and darker in the gloomy depths. The iron-shod hoofs of the animals filled the narrow place with clattering sounds as they passed down the rocky path. Finally, they halted in the darkness, and Viona felt that they were in a cave of some kind. A moment later a sharp, piercing whistle echoed through the place, then several lights appeared and Viona was lowered gently upon her feet and led away by Captain Nameless.

The girl was wondering where she was and what her fate would be. She dreaded to address the strange, silent man at her side, for although his every act was gentle and courteous, there was an air of mystery hanging about him that filled her with awe and fear. Who was he?—what was he? She asked herself the questions, and something within her heart seemed to tell her that he was a person to be feared. She felt her hand tremble in the grasp of his, which was incased in a heavy glove.

"Fear not, fair girl," said the strange man, who seemed to have read her very thoughts. "I did not bring you here to harm you, although I have no particular love for your sex. I am a man who renounced the world and fled to these wilds that he might escape from the presence of treacherous women, but when fortune throws one of the fair sex in his way, he is not the one to deliberately do her injury. Do not think that, even of the man who has given up everything, including his name, because of the treachery of a woman."

Viona made no reply, and a short time later she found herself in a small chamber which appeared to be lighted by a burning jet of natural gas. She looked around and saw with much surprise that the rock-bound room appeared very comfortable. There were rude chairs, a couch, a swinging hammock, tanned skins on the floor and even ornaments on the walls.

"How do you like it?" questioned the strange man who had brought her there. "Not so very bad if you do not have to stay here long—eh?"

"No," was her faltering reply.

"Well, you certainly shall not be detained here long, so make yourself easy while you have to stay. Food and water shall be brought you. If I were in your place, I would not leave this chamber, for you might become lost in the darkness beyond the door. I must leave you now, but you shall see me again as soon as the condition of things will permit. Farewell for the present."

And bowing low, but failing to lift his broad-brimmed hat, he retreated from the room, closing the heavy wooden door behind him.

For several moments Viona stood still in the center of the chamber, a prey of various emotions. She wondered if she were a captive, and suddenly sprung toward the heavy wooden door. It swung slowly open at her touch, showing that, at least, she was not confined to that chamber. She peered out into the passage, but shuddered when she looked beyond the light which shone through the open door and fell upon the opposite wall of rocks, outlining her dark shadow with startling distinctness. Up and down the passage to the right and left was naught but darkness

and silence. She quickly closed the door and turned back, throwing herself into one of the easiest chairs, with a nervous laugh that ended in a broken sob.

"What will happen next?" she exclaimed, staring at the walls around her. "One adventure follows another with such startling rapidity that I am confused, bewildered. Just at the moment when it seemed that all my troubles were at an end, I was snatched from Victor's side by that merciless wretch, Dingle, the Desperado. Then this strange man of the masked face and mysterious manner tears me from Dingle's grasp and brings me to this underground retreat. For all of his quiet manner and smooth words, he may be as great a villain as Dingle himself—but I cannot quite think so. He appears like a gentleman, even though he hides his face behind a mask."

For a long time she sat there, thinking, thinking. Her brain seemed in a whirl as she reviewed the startling events of the past two weeks, and at that moment it seemed almost like the phantasm of a midnight dream. When she closed her eyes and allowed her memory to recall the strange happenings which had been crowded into that brief space of time, it all seemed like the illusive visions and kaleidoscopic changes of an unnatural phantasmagoria. But when she opened her eyes and looked around, she knew only too well that her memory had served her no trick—everything had actually happened as she recalled it.

"But the future," she cried, starting up, "what does the future hold in store? Victor—ah, merciful God! is he dead? I saw him fall before the pistol of that blood-stained wretch—saw him fall and lay like one stricken by death! But, oh heavens! it cannot be, it cannot! My heart rebels against the thought! I will not believe it!" springing up to swiftly and excitedly pace the rocky floor. "Fate cannot be so cruel, so cruel! He still lives—I shall see him before me—his dark eyes will look into mine—he will catch me in his arms and cover my lips with kisses, with kisses! Oh, heavens! where is he now?" stretching out her arms to the rocky walls. "Ah, Victor, Victor, my king! come to your own true love—come, come!"

Suddenly pressing her hands to her bosom, she swayed for an instant and then caught at the nearest chair for support. Her face was as colorless as marble and she seemed about to faint, but by a great effort, she overcame the weakness.

"I must be strong," she whispered. "It will not do for me to grow faint-hearted now. I must have food and rest."

It was not long before the door swung softly open and a man who bore a tray, on which were dishes containing food and drink, stepped softly into the chamber. He was masked, but unlike the other men whom she had seen, his mask was not blue and he did not wear a blue coat. He quickly converted one of the chairs into a table, upon which he placed the tray, and then stood waiting as if inquiring if she wished for anything else.

"Perhaps I can learn something about this place from him," was the girl's sudden thought.

But when she questioned the man about the cave and the mysterious men of the blue coats, he remained silent, appearing deaf to her words. Finally, almost angry at his silence, she asked him what he was waiting for, when she quickly discovered that he was not a mute by any means, for he answered that he was waiting to learn if she wished for anything more. She replied that she did not, and he wheeled and vanished from the chamber.

The food looked tempting, and for the first time in many days she ate heartily and satisfied the cravings of her hunger. The food that she had been compelled to eat while with Dingle was of the vilest sort, and she had partaken very sparingly of it. Now she could eat with relish.

Some time after she had finished eating, the man who had brought the food appeared again and took away the tray, leaving a small tin pail of water and a dipper, at the same time apologizing curtly for the rudeness of the dishes. When he was gone the girl hastened to the door, and with a cry of satisfaction, discovered that it could be securely fastened on the inner side.

"I will be secure from intrusion while I sleep," she almost laughed, as she fastened the door.

Then she went back to the cot, threw herself upon it, and was soon in the Land of Dreams.

It might have been hours or minutes that she slept—she could not tell—when she was suddenly aroused by a strange sound that rung through the chamber.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

It was a wild, maniacal laugh, and as she started up from the cot, she uttered a shriek of horror, for, less than five feet away, in that very chamber, she saw the deformed body, scarred features and gleaming eyes of the mountain monster, Scar-Face!

CHAPTER XX.

SCAR FACE'S STORY—VIONA'S FEARS.

AT first she thought it some horrible hallucination conjured into existence by her overtaxed

brain, but a second look served to convince her that it was truly the terrible man of the scarred face who stood half-crouching before her, his claw-like fingers working convulsively and his eyes gleaming with a blood-chilling light. But how had the creature gained admittance to the chamber? She glanced toward the door and saw that the fastenings were just as she had placed them before she lay down to sleep.

Again that fiendish laugh rung through the chamber and the hunchback appeared to crouch still lower like a tiger on the point of launching itself at its prey. Viona tried to cry out, but after that first wild cry, her tongue seemed frozen to the roof of her mouth and she was unable to utter a sound. Her apparent terror seemed to delight the deformed man of the mountains, for he laughed again and again.

"Ha! ha! you fear me!" he cried, hoarsely, tossing the long hair back from his face. "You have seen me before, yet you are afraid of me! Oh-ho! What is there about me to give you fear? Am I not handsome—am I not fair to look upon? Ah-r-r-gh! You shrink from me! You are a woman, and the time was when women gazed upon my form and face with admiration, for then I was tall and straight and handsome. These cursed scars were not there then; my face was smooth—smooth and handsome! Do you doubt it?"

He snarled at the question and paused as if waiting for a reply, but the panting girl could not command her voice. She tried to speak, but was able to make nothing but a gasping sound. This seemed to increase the wild man's rage or delight, she could not tell which, for he danced and laughed and growled all at the same time.

"You don't speak, my pretty one!" he mocked. "Have you lost your tongue? You are afraid—I know you are! A woman is afraid of this face? Ugh-r-r-ah! I hate them—I hate women! But for a woman—a woman fair and treacherous—these hideous scars would not be on my face to-day! It was a woman's falseness—a woman's dastardly perfidy that placed them there! If you knew the truth you would not wonder that I hate them all! If you knew the truth—but, bah! you are like them all. They are fair and false—curse them!"

He ceased speaking with an abruptness that was almost as alarming as his wild words. Once more Viona allowed her eyes to wander toward the fastened door. A sudden thought came to her. Could she not spring to the door, undo the fastenings, tear it open and fly into the darkness of the cavern before the madman could reach her? It was a wild scheme, but any expedient was preferable to remaining shut in that rocky chamber with that horrible being. She would try it! She was calculating just how many bounds it would take to reach the door when Scar-Face uttered a low chuckle of triumph and sprung between her and the heavy wooden portal, effectually blasting her wild scheme.

"Oh, no, you don't, my dear!" he nodded, grimly, extending his hands toward her with the long fingers crooked in a manner which seemed to indicate a desire to seize her. "I can read your thoughts, my pretty one! You would try to leave me without listening to the pleasant little story that I wish to tell you. The pleasant little story—ha! ha!—pleasant, indeed! Why do I want to tell it to you? Do you know? I am sure that I cannot tell myself, but something seems urging me to tell you the tale. For that reason I came here."

"How did you get in?" Viona managed to faintly ask.

"Get in?" repeated the deformed, slowly and impressively. "My child, you do not know my power. I go where I please and nothing holds me back. I can fly through the air or I can pass through solid stone. To-night I passed through the solid stone and so came in here while you slept. I stood above you looking down at your beautiful face. Then I did think of going away without arousing you and telling you the little story—the pretty tale of a woman's treachery. I tried to tear myself away, but as you lay there with your arm tossed above that head of yellow hair, you made me think of her. She was beautiful then, but that was long ago. Now she is wrinkled and baggy, and her hair is white as the driven snow. As I stood above you, watching you as you slept, it almost seemed that I was young again, and that it was she who lay before me. Often in those old days did I watch her while she slept; and I was proud—so proud! of her. But within her breast was the treacherous heart of a viper! I petted and fondled the fair serpent, and after a time it buried its fangs in my heart!"

The strange creature paused and covered his hideous face with his hands. For several moments he stood shaking in every limb as might a person suddenly attacked by the ague. The girl watched him as if fascinated, but her strength deserted her and she sunk down on the couch. Finally Scar-Face lowered his hands, and she was startled by the change that had come over his features.

"I loved her!" he said softly, brushing back his long hair. "I loved her with my entire being! I would have died a thousand deaths to

have saved her a single pain! My child, you may think me mad—perhaps I am; God only knows! I have passed through enough to make any man mad or put him in his grave; but I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I loved her so much that I would have passed through the tortures of the damned for her if it were necessary. It was a love strong and pure and true. I believed that she loved me as I loved her, and although I never expect to enter the portals of Heaven, I know that I have tasted the happiness of that blissful land!"

How his manner had changed—how his looks had changed! The girl could scarcely believe the evidence of her eyes. His scarred and disfigured face had softened as he spoke until, as he finished with uplifted eyes, a little cry of wonder broke from Viona's lips. His fire-marked features had lost all their repulsiveness and looked almost grand and noble. He had unconsciously straightened up till the unsightly hump upon his back was almost lost to view and his figure was tall and nearly straight. Even his hands had apparently changed, for, strange to say, they had lost their claw-like appearance, and but for the scars upon them would have been long and shapely. It almost seemed that another man stood where the hideous creature had been a few moments before.

For a few seconds the strange being stood there, seeming to have forgotten that there was any one else in the chamber. At length he lowered his eyes upon the girl, his face began to work convulsively, his fingers became crooked again like the claws of a hawk, his body slowly bent forward, his eyes gleamed redly beyond the mass of hair which fell down over his face, and—Horror! he was the fiend once more!

Such a scene was fearfully trying for the nerves of the already shaken girl and again she came near fainting. Perhaps the singular being saw how it affected her, for he turned and took one or two strides toward the door. When he faced her again, she was regarding him curiously.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, hoarsely. "You were frightened, my child; but you need have no fear of me. I swear I will not harm you. I hate your sex, but I am not going to harm you because of my hatred. You are not the one who did me the terrible wrong so many years ago. She was my wife. I married her, loved her, trusted her! I would have thought the heavens could fall before I would have entertained a thought that she could play me false. It would have been as much as any man's life was worth for him to have even hinted that she was false to me. I should have flown at his throat like a mad dog. And yet the beautiful woman in whom I put so much confidence played me false—betrayed me and fled with her guilty lover!"

"I came home one night when I was not expected," he resumed after a slight pause, during which he wet his lips with his tongue, as if they were dry and parched. "I entered the house and went straight to her room. The light was turned low and, as I opened the door, a man leaped upon me, grasped my throat and drove a knife into my breast! I had made some noise in entering, but my wife's lover was unable to escape, and so he had struck that terrible blow straight at my heart. I know now that the knife must have struck a rib and been turned aside, but the shock of the blow sent me senseless to the floor. At the very moment when the knife was driven into my breast I saw my wife spring from behind the curtains which had concealed her and her lover assassin, and her wild shriek rung in my ears as I became unconscious."

"When I came to my senses I seemed to be stifled by smoke and scorched in a furnace of flame. There was a roaring sound all around me and a bright light blinded my eyes. I started up. My God! There was fire all around me! I was in a furnace of flame—my burning home! My false wife and her murderous lover had fled, and, in order to blot out their black work, had fired the house behind them. Think of it—think of the fiendish treachery of the woman who had laid on my breast and received my caresses! I staggered to my feet and tried to look around. There was fire—leaping, crackling fire—on every hand! A perfect wall of flames seemed to surround me! I could see no way of escape! Like a madman, I dashed straight into the seething vortex—straight into the red fire that scorched and burned and disfigured me for life! By chance I must have bounded straight toward a window, for I felt myself falling, then I struck with a shock that once more deprived me of my senses."

"I am here, but I would have died beneath that window beside my burning home had there not been neighbors there. I know not how they saved my life, for I can remember but little of what followed, but I do know that, when I was able to do so, I escaped them all and started to search for my wife and her lover. Years have passed—how many I know not—but I have found her at last. Ha! ha!" he fairly shrieked. "I have found her at last! Now I will find him—then vengeance! Ah! vengeance!"

The girl shrunk away with a cry of fear, for he had started toward her with his fingers working convulsively and his eyes blazing in a fearful manner. She thought him about to leap

upon her, but once more her tongue was chained with horror. Suddenly he wheeled toward the door, lifted one hand, and appeared to be listening.

"I hear footsteps!" he hissed. "Some one is coming! I must be quick!"

He started forward again, and with a feeble attempt to cry out, the poor girl sunk face down upon the couch, believing that her last minutes had arrived. For almost a minute she lay thus, still the fiend did not touch her. She heard a harsh, grating sound and ventured to look up. Then a gasp of amazement came from her lips.

The chamber was deserted save by herself! Scar-Face had vanished!

CHAPTER XXI. MYSTERIOUS MOVES.

YES, the mountain monster had really left the chamber. At first Viona looked around, fully expecting to see him crouching in some corner, but he was not there. She was alone once more, but she felt sure that the deformed had not departed by the door. Indeed a single glance convinced her beyond a doubt that he had made his exit in some other manner, for the door was still fastened as she had left it. But how had he left the chamber? There seemed to be no other opening, for her eyes could see nothing but the bare wall of stone.

Suddenly the girl was again seized by a feeling of terror. Scar-Face might return! The thought made her almost frantic, and she sprang up and ran to the door. With trembling fingers she undid the fastenings, fully determined to take refuge in the darkness of the passage; but when she tried to open the door it refused to move. Vainly she flung herself against it and beat upon it with her tender hands, crying aloud for some one to come to her aid. Suddenly the truth dawned upon her.

The door was fastened on the other side!

With a low moan she staggered back and fell upon the couch. She believed that she had fallen into the hands of a set of merciless fiends, who were more to be dreaded than Dingle and his ruffianly crew. What would be her fate? She covered her face with her hands, and at that moment heard a sound as of some one entering the chamber. She did not dare remove her hands for fear she should see that terrible fire-marked face before her once more. For a long time she remained thus, but, failing to hear any further sounds, she finally lowered her hands.

Captain Nameless stood before her!

She half-started up, uttering a low cry of mingled surprise and relief as she saw that tall, straight form standing so silently a few feet away. The mysterious man's arms were folded over his breast, and he stood steadily regarding her through the twin holes in his blue mask.

"Oh, I feared he had returned!" gasped Viona. "I am so glad! You will not let him come here again?"

Captain Nameless appeared puzzled.

"Of whom are you speaking?" he asked. "You must have been dreaming unpleasant things."

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, earnestly; "it was no dream! I wish it had been! But he came here—the man of the terrible scarred face! When I first saw him I thought I might be dreaming, but I soon convinced myself that I was wide awake."

She imagined that the blue-coated man started a little when she spoke of the man of the scarred face, but his voice was perfectly calm as he asked:

"When did this happen?"

"Just now. He has just gone from here. He said he heard some one coming; it must have been you."

"But I saw no one leave this chamber by the door."

"No, no! he did not go out by the door."

"Did not go out by the door? Why, there is no other way of leaving the place. You surely must be mistaken."

"I am sure that I am not, for he did not come in by the door. How do I know? Why, the door was fastened on the inside. I fixed it so when I lay down to sleep."

"And this person, whoever he was, came in while you slept?"

"Yes, for when I awoke he was standing right there where you are now, and his fiery eyes seemed to scorch me as he kept them fastened on my face. I feared that he would murder me."

"My dear girl," said the Blue Coat chief, slowly and pityingly, "you have evidently had a very bad dream. Of course it seemed real—I do not doubt that; but it was certainly a dream, for no one can enter or leave this chamber except by that door. When that is fastened, you are quite secure from intrusion."

Viona wrung her hands and looked helplessly at the man before her. How could she convince him that what she had seen was not a dream, but a horrible reality? He seemed perfectly certain that she had been dreaming.

"There is such a creature," she replied—"there is a man with a terribly scarred face who lives somewhere among these mountains."

Captain Nameless bowed.

"You are right, for I have seen the fellow

several times. I have even heard his story—a story of woman's treachery. He has no love for the fair sex, and in that respect, at least, he and I have something in common."

"But if you acknowledge that such a person exists, why do you deny that he was here?"

"Because it is utterly impossible for him to reach this place without my knowledge or the knowledge of some of my men. You have seen this creature before?"

"Yes."

"That explains it all. Your thoughts were of him when you fell asleep, and very naturally you dreamed that he came here. There can be no other explanation."

She saw that it was useless to argue with him, but she started up, crying:

"I will not remain here! I cannot stay where that creature can come whenever he pleases! Let me go away!"

He did not stir from his tracks.

"There is no other place in the cave for you. You must stay here while you remain in the cavern."

"Then let me leave the cavern! I will not remain here!"

"You are as unreasonable as most pretty women," said the chief of the Blue Coats, a touch of scorn in his voice. "Indeed, your face reminds me of one who played me false years ago. She was fair and beautiful and treacherous. But enough of that! I am a man without a name, and let me tell you something else—something that may give you a shudder—I am a man without a heart! The fair hands of a false woman tore it from my breast years ago!"

Viona shrunk back on the couch, her face growing white with fear. Was this strange masked man also mad? He saw that she was frightened and flung out his hand with a strange gesture.

"I won't harm you," he declared. "You have no cause to fear me. In fact, I have decided to befriend you. I am going out to find your friends, who are somewhere in this vicinity. When I have found them, you shall be reunited."

"Oh, sir," cried the girl, "I thank you. It cannot be that you have no heart, for you are kind."

"Kind!" broke hoarsely from his lips—"kind! The word is a mockery! I know it not! Far from being kind, I am the next thing to the foul fiend himself! Kindness does not dwell in my breast; there is nothing but hatred and a longing for revenge there!"

Then, before she could stop him or cry out, he swiftly left the chamber closing the door behind him. For some seconds she sat like one dazed, then she leaped up and tried the door.

It was fastened again.

"Merciful heavens!" she sobbed. "I am shut in here once more! I pray God that that fiend does not return!"

Gradually her strength came back to her, and she paced up and down the cavern floor. She did not dare to lie down for fear that she might fall asleep again. She felt that if she slept the creature of the scarred face might creep in upon her again.

"Should I awaken once more to see him bending over me, I think I should go mad myself. If he comes when I am asleep, he will fill me with terror; but if I am awake when he appears, I shall see him enter the chamber and the shock will not be so great. I will keep awake."

There was a mystery about the place and about the singular man who called himself Captain Nameless that impressed her strangely. She could not understand the motive of the chief of the Blue Coats in bringing her to his cavern retreat. But not only was she puzzled by that, but she found his sudden desertion of the chamber and fastening of the door something to wonder at. He had said that he would find her friends and restore her to them. Would he do it?

Slowly the hours dragged away. At length, she heard some one fumbling with the fastenings of the door. Was Captain Nameless returning?

Her question was soon answered, for the door opened and the same man who had brought her food before appeared again with a loaded tray. Although her disappointment was great when she saw that it was not Captain Nameless, she instantly became aware that she was hungry again. The man placed the tray in the same chair, and with a low bow, retired. She heard him fasten the door behind him.

"Well, I will eat," she almost laughed. "There is no need of starving as long as food is placed before me."

When she had satisfied her hunger, she discovered that she was rapidly becoming very drowsy. In vain she tried to fight off the feeling; slowly, slowly it came creeping over her, stealing away her senses. A horrible suspicion passed through her sluggish brain.

The food had been drugged!

That thought was the last that she remembered. She had lost all fear of the demon, Scar-Face—really she had forgotten him. Slowly she sunk back upon the couch—her blue eyes closed—she slept!

What passed while she lay in that heavy, dreamless slumber she did not know. Slowly

her consciousness came back to her, and long before she could move or even open her eyes, she felt a cool, wet hand stroking her forehead. Intuition told her that it was the hand of a woman!

Finally she opened her eyes and found, close to hers, revealed by a flaring, unsteady light, a dusky, beautiful face—the face of a young girl! The sight filled her with wonder, but for the instant she was unable to speak. As soon as she opened her eyes, the girl by her side gave a little exclamation of delight.

"The beautiful white maiden lives!" she laughed. "At first I thought her dead, she was so white and motionless; but I found that her heart still beat, and I set myself to bring her back from the strange trance. I have succeeded."

"Who are you?" Viona managed to faintly ask.

For an instant a cloud seemed to settle on the strange girl's dark face, then she smiled a little as she replied:

"I do not know who I am, but I am called the White Rose of the Sioux."

Viona looked inquiringly at the girl.

"Surely you are not an Indian?" she exclaimed.

"No, I am not; but I have lived with the Sioux ever since I can remember. A white woman who was a captive taught me the language of the pale-faces. She was with me many years, and taught me many things."

"But how came you here?" asked Viona, looking around. Then, for the first time, she became aware that she was not in the chamber where she fell asleep.

"Why, where am I?" she gasped, rising on one elbow.

"You are in a cave."

"Yes, I see; but this is not the place where Captain Nameless took me—this is not the place where I fell asleep. How came I here?"

"That I cannot tell. I was gone from the cavern but a short time. I went to see that my friends, who were going to find their horses, took the right direction. I did not let them know I followed them. When I started to return I came upon a party of warriors, and with difficulty I escaped them. I think that one followed me, and I was obliged to travel a great ways that I might not be seen coming back here. When I entered the cave you were here. There was blood on the blanket beneath your head. I thought you hurt, but I found no wound. How the blood came there I cannot tell. It is strange. How you came here I cannot tell. It is a mystery."

"I was drugged!" exclaimed Viona. "I believe that the man who calls himself Captain Nameless caused me to be drugged and then brought me here. But why he did so I cannot understand. As you say, it is a mystery."

"Have you a brother?" asked Rose.

"Yes; and, with a friend, he is somewhere in this vicinity searching for me."

"Describe him."

Viona did so, at which the dusky maiden exclaimed:

"He was here!"

Then she rapidly told Viona a story which the reader already knows. The fair-haired maiden became greatly excited when she learned that her brother and Victor had been there in that very cave only a little while before. The assurance that they would soon return filled her with joy, and on the impulse of the moment she flung her arms around her new-found friend's neck. The next instant she started back with a cry of terror and dismay, pointing one trembling hand toward the opening which led into the other part of the cave.

Standing in the very center of the natural archway, fully revealed by the flaring firelight, they both saw an Indian warrior!

CHAPTER XXII.

HANDY HARRY ON HAND.

WITH a variety of emotions which cannot be described the three whites and the friendly Crow watched the battle in the little mountain pocket between the red and white marauders and the mounted Blue Coats led by Captain Nameless. In their excitement they arose from their places of concealment and watched the stirring scenes below. There was little danger of their presence being discovered, but they thought nothing of danger.

"What in blazes does that mean?" cried Little Rocks.

"It looks like er case o' dog eat dog," Montana Jim replied. "I don't exactly know w'at kinder critters them with blue coats are, but they wear masks, an' thet's ernuff ter condemn 'em in my mine. They're sum measly gang o' lan' pirates."

"Well, they are fighters straight from the shoulder," chimed in Handy Harry; "and that goes a long way toward giving them a warm corner in my heart. You fellows can think what you please."

"Ugh! Blue coat men heap fight!" grunted Hawk Eye, as he calmly surveyed the scene. "They not so menny as Injuns and bad pale-faces, but good pile smart."

"Now you have said it all," nodded the card-sharp. "You are no fool, if you are nothing but a Crow."

"Hawk Eye no fool," repeated the friendly, a pleased look on his swarthy face. "Him 'member that."

"Look thar!" old Jim suddenly exclaimed. "I sw'ar ef thet feller with yaller shinin' all over him bain't grabbed ther gal!"

He spoke the truth, for just a moment before Captain Nameless had caught Viona in his arms and swung her up in front of him. It was a feat which commanded the admiration of the spectators on the cliff.

"An' by smoke! thet ends ther scrimmage!" burst from the lips of the little scout. "Them blue-coated fellers are going ter git."

"You are right," the sport agreed. "That whole charge was made for the purpose of obtaining possession of the girl. It worked to a charm, and now the victors are going to light out. It will be necessary for us to plan to rescue her from those red and white rascals."

"But her condishun may not be improved er durned bit," growled the veteran fortune-hunter. "She may be in ther han's o' villains as bad as them others."

"I reckon not," said Little Rocks; "for if I am not bad mistook, them varmints down thar are sum o' Big Buck Dingle's whelps o' perdition. Yes, I'm right, fer thar—right thar—is Dingle hisself."

It was at this moment that the desperado chief hurled his empty revolvers after the retreating Blue Coats and broke into a wild dance of rage, while he cursed and raved till the air was blue. His capers were so ludicrous that the watching whites burst into laughter. The Crow regarded his caperings with a critical eye, and finally observed:

"Heap hop high. Cussid fool!"

"Solid sense again," laughed Harry. "You have sized him up in great shape, red."

Suddenly the Indian turned toward them, saying:

"Hawk Eye foller blue coat riders, see where take gal. Him come back, tell white pards."

"And, by the rod of Aaron! I'm going with you!" cried Handy Harry. "A female in peril always did appeal to the chivalrous in my nature. Come on, red."

But the arrangement did not meet Montana Jim's approval.

"Hole on thar!" he cried. "Don't go off at hafe-cock. W'at in blazes you want skin out ter? Ther red kin do better without ye then he kin with ye. We need you with us."

"Then I reckon you will have to need," the card-sharp tossed over his shoulder, as he hurried away after the Crow. "Ta, ta, pards! I will see you again some time between now and the millennium. If you need me, just holler and I will drop round the corner. I am always near when badly wanted."

"Now, this is elegant," growled Jim, when the Indian and the sport had disappeared. "Who'd 'a' thort o' him scootin' orf in thet way! It does seem ez though ther Ole Nick hes got inter ever'buddy!"

"Let 'em go, pard," advised Little Rocks, calmly. "Thet's ther bes' way ter do w'en ye can't do enny other way. Thet feller's young, an' I guesses he's got gal on, ther brain kinder suddint like. Let him go, pard; you an' I kin took keer o' ourselves, I reckon."

"Thet's so," the old prospector agreed. "It seems like ole times fer us two ter be tergether. But I'm thinkin' we'd best git away frum hyer afore them critters down thar sight us."

Jim agreed to this and they moved quickly away from that vicinity. Half-a-mile away they halted.

"We'd best wait hyer a while," said Jim, "fer Harry may git tired o' follerin' them Blue Coats. Thet red is a walker, I'll bet."

"You are right," nodded Rocks. "Ther Injun kin fairly fly when he takes a noshun. Your pard will hev ter hev good legs ter keep ennywhur."

"Oh, he'll be cumin' back," laughed old Jim. "We'll lay down hyer an' hev er smoke w'ile we are waitin' fer him."

So they threw themselves on the ground, produced their pipes and enjoyed a smoke, while they talked over old times and told how the world had used them since last they met. They were not aware how much time elapsed while they were thus engaged, but the period was much longer than they thought. Finally, Jim looked at the sun, shook his head and observed:

"Don't believe ther boy's cumin' back. He must hev ther clean stick to him. Reckon we'd better be gittin' back to take er look at ther hosses. 'Twon't do ter leave 'em alone too long."

"Ye'r' right, ole man," nodded the little scout. "Sumun might happen erlong."

So they picked up their rifles and started. They little dreamed of the surprise that awaited them when they reached the spot where the horses had been concealed.

"Great Joopiter! they're gone!" gasped the old prospector.

"Gone!" echoed Little Rocks, glancing sharply around as if searching for them, but really looking for enemies. "W'at does thet mean?"

"Mean!" roared the veteran. "It means thet they hev bin stole!"

"Yes; but who done it?"

"I don't know now," snarled the angry veteran; "but I will know, if I hev ter chase 'em ter Hallyfax! They went either up ur down; seeef you kin make out which."

Together they began to hunt for the trail which would tell them which way the thieves departed with the stolen animals. The ground was very rocky and baffling, but soon Little Rocks cried:

"They went up, sure pop! Hyer's ther sign! How's yer feet, ole man?"

"Good fer one stiff pull. Go on; I'm with ye."

Then they started at a lope, side by side, up the ravine. Little Rocks was a practiced runner. Jim had been a good runner in the past, but was a little "off" just then, for he was growing old and did not keep up the practice. But his wind was pretty good, and he held out as long as was necessary, for the thieves had but little start and did not know that they were pursued till the enraged men were close upon them. The horses had been taken by four whites and two reds.

"Thar they are, by gum!" gasped Jim, exultantly, as he caught a glimpse of some figures just disappearing beyond a rocky bend.

"How menny?" asked Rocks.

"Didn't see but two."

So they ran on, dashed around the bend and found themselves confronted by six men.

"Hold up thar!" cried one of the whites, bringing a revolver to bear on Jim. "Whut's yer hurry?"

The old prospector and the scout came to an abrupt halt.

"Whut d'yer want?" demanded another.

"Whut!" snorted Jim. "I reckon ye know well ernuff w'at we're arter. We want them two led hosses."

"You don't say!" sneered one of the fellows. "Wal, 'bout how much are ye willin' ter pay fer 'em?"

Montana Jim almost frothed, as he doubled his knotty fist and shook it savagely at the taunting speaker.

"Pay fer 'em!" he roared. "Blast my hide ef you hain't got ther gall! Them hosses belong ter us, you sneakin' thieves; an' w'at's more, we're goin' ter hev 'em! Pay fer 'em!" he howled again. "Ef you don't give 'em up ter oncet, we'll fill your hides full o' holes!"

"Now is that so?" drawled one of the thieves. "Don't it occur to you that we hold ther drop, an' hold it bad?"

There was no disputing that fact, but Montana's rage did not seem to cool in the least degree.

"Hang ther drop!" he cried contemptuously. "I'll bet ther hain't one o' ye as can hit a barn even w'en he's shut up on ther inside. We don't keer a durn ef ye hole er drop, er pint or er gallon! We're hyer arter them hosses, an' we're goin' ter take 'em!"

"You will take 'em by payin' our price," was the cool assertion. "Not otherwise."

"Then hyer ye hev it in lead!" roared the old prospector, throwing his rifle to his shoulder. But one of the rascals had been looking for such a move, and he instantly discharged his revolver. The bullet struck on the barrel of the rifle and cut through the air close to the old man's head. Jim's aim was spoiled and the lead from his rifle flew wide of the mark. The two reports seemed the signal for a general onslaught.

"Down with 'em!" howled one of the thieves.

But before the deadly work was fairly inaugurated, there came a clatter of hoofs, a wild cheer, and then Handy Harry swept 'round the bend, a revolver in each hand. The instant he came in sight he opened fire, blazing away in a most reckless manner as he came charging down upon the startled men.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SETH'S HORSE—THE MADMAN'S FURY.

FOR an instant the horse-thieves and their pursuers were motionless with surprise as the sport came charging toward them. But when the bullets from the oncoming man's revolvers began to whistle around the ears of the thieves they were seized by a sudden terror, and without hesitation, they reined their horses round and fled. This move was executed so swiftly that Jim and Rocks had no chance to prevent it, and before they could get in a shot, the flying rascals were some distance away. Then the old prospector's rifle leaped to his shoulder, a spurt of flame burst from the muzzle and the report echoed along the ravine. But for some reason the veteran—who was called a dead shot—made a clean miss. Little Rocks did not fire for fear of shooting one of the led horses.

"Just in time, pards," shouted Handy Harry, as he swept past. "I'll overtake those fellows if I have to chase them to the open polar sea! Look for me later."

Without reining in for an instant, he continued on after the flying horse-thieves.

"Cum on, pard!" cried Montana Jim to the little scout. "We hed best foller ez fast ez our legs 'll kerry us, fer thet howlin' young blade

may overtake them varmints an' need sum o' our help. Wonder whar he popped frum?"

"You tell!" was the scout's reply, as he ran at Jim's side. "He happened erlong at jest erbout ther right time, fer if he had not, I reckon our show with them fellows w'u'dn't 'a' mounted ter shucks. They had ther deadwood onter us."

"You're jest rite," confessed the veteran fortune-hunter. "I knew they hed us foul, but I wuzn't goin' ter squawk, bet yer boots! Jest ther same, I'm glad thet durned card-slinger turned up jest ez he did. I sw'ar he kin throw lead lively!"

"You are shoutin', but I didn't notiss ennythin' drap, did you? Don't reckon he wuz puttin' thet in fer er fine display o' marksmanship."

"Twuz ez good ez mine!" snorted Jim, in disgust. "I never did make sich er clean out an' out miss. I must 'a' bin rattled."

"Reckon he wuz shootin' more fer ther noise it made than ennythin' else. It giv them whelps er start ennyhow."

"Yes, start ernuff so thet they got erway. But he may overhaul 'em yit, an' ef he duz, we want ter be thar."

But Handy Harry was destined to fail in his attempt to overtake the thieves. The prospector and the scout had not traveled more than a mile before they came upon the sport sitting on a boulder and swearing in an astonishing manner while he regarded the horse that he had lately ridden, but which was now standing with lowered head and heaving sides.

"W'at's ther matter?" panted Jim, as he came up, with Rocks at his side.

"Matter!" snapped Harry, appearing to notice their approach for the first time—"there's matter enough! Just look at that cursed beast!"

"Winded?" inquired the little scout.

"Winded!" echoed the man on the boulder—"worse than winded! He's lame as a pack-mule!"

"How did it happen?"

"It happened just as I was overtaking those fellows. He fell and threw me. Came near breaking my worthless neck, but I was up and onto him in a moment. Then I discovered that he could scarcely hobble. I reckon it has spoiled the creature."

"That is bad; but whar did ye run onter ther critter? You didn't hev no hoss w'en you left us, an' them thieves hev got yourn."

"This is one I found wandering where he pleased, all saddled and bridled and fit for the fray. He didn't seem to have any owner attached, so I confiscated him."

"But I thought you wuz goin' ter foller Hawk Eye," grinned Rocks.

"Oh, hang the Injun!" exclaimed Harry, a sheepish smile stealing over his face. "I have no wings and my legs are not made to fly with. I couldn't keep anywhere near him."

At this moment Jim, who had been curiously regarding the heavy-breathing horse, uttered an exclamation.

"Look hyer!" he cried, excitedly; "don't you know this hoss?"

"Well, I ought to," nodded the card-sharp. "We have been on very familiar terms for a short time at least, although I can't say that I have ever had the pleasure of being introduced formally to the animal."

"You must be blind!" said the prospector, with some scorn. "He is covered with sweat and looks hardly natteral ez he stan's hangin' his head, but I know him. Why, thet's Seth's hoss!"

Handy Harry jumped up and took another view of the animal.

"You are right," he acknowledged, slowly. "This is the animal formerly ridden by our silent friend. I think I am becoming fooler and fooler every day I live! I ought to have known that beast as soon as I placed my eagle eyes upon his graceful carcass. Will one of you gentlemen be kind enough to kill me and save the Fool-Killer a mighty unpleasant job?"

"I sh'u'd 'a' thort you'd 'a' knowed thet saddle," Jim gravely declared. "W'at kin hev happened ter Seth?"

Little Rocks examined the horse's saddle and back, at the same time observing:

"If your pard has been shot, there ought to be sum traces o' blood hyer, but I can't find enny."

"Jest ther same, su'thin' hes happened ter him," nodded the old miner. "Ef not, his horse w'u'd never bin foun' wanderin' in sich er way."

Handy Harry agreed with this by a motion, but appeared to be thinking deeply. Finally he lifted his head, saying somewhat gravely for him:

"I am afraid we shall not see our silent friend again very soon."

"You think—"

"That he may have found the gentleman with the raven beard again—yes. If he has, there has been serious trouble, bet your buttons! He did not desert his horse and leave the animal to wander where he listed."

To this the others agreed. Without doubt Seth had fallen into trouble of some kind. The old miner was inclined to think him dead, and

when he expressed his mind, Harry said not a word.

"We'll be fortornate ef we git out o' this kentry without leavin' our bones ter keep his cumperry," said Jim, gloomily. "Ef I had dreamed w'at kind o' scrapes we'd 'a' got inter, I'd never cum."

"Don't lose your heart now, old man," urged Handy Harry. "Solid sand will pull us through."

"Mebbe; but w'at we goin' ter do without hosses? Now thet them varmints hev got erway with our critters, we are in er mighty bad boel."

The sport confessed that this was true, but seemed to feel sure that they would be able to pull through all right. Little Rocks was also cheerful and confident.

"I hed er hoss w'en I started out," said he; "but ther pesky copper-skins shot it frum under me an' I hed ter run fer my life. But thet don't trubble me er mite, fer ther reds hev got to furnish me with ernuther. We kin all git hosses in thet way ef we are not lucky ernuff ter rekyver them thet you hed stole."

"As for me," declared the card-sharp, "I am for following those thieves and doing our best to overtake them. We may be successful."

To this the others agreed, although they seemed to consider the prospect of overtaking the villains very poor. It was probable that the men who took the horses were a part of Dingle's marauders, and would soon join the desperado at some selected point.

"What are we to do with this animal while we are chasing them?" asked Harry. "We do not want to lose this horse, for his lameness may not prove serious."

"You are right," agreed old Jim. "The only plan that I kin think of is ter tether him whar he kin git grass an' watter an' fix him so thet he kin break away ef we do not return."

This seemed the best thing that they could do, but it happened that none of them knew a place near by where water could be found. They finally started forward, leading the horse, which seemed to grow lamer as they advanced. Fortune favored them, however, for they did not have to travel very far before they found a small spring surrounded by a plot of green grass. There they tethered the horse and left him to his fate, while they hastened onward after the thieves.

It is not necessary to describe their long tramp. They were all very hungry, but by some strange chance, they did not see a thing in the way of game. The afternoon was well spent when they suddenly came in sight of two persons who appeared to be talking in a very excited manner. One they instantly recognized.

"Good Lawd!" gasped Montana Jim. "It's Seth!"

He was right; one of the excited persons was the strange silent man.

"But what in the name of all that is wonderful is it that he is holding that pow-wow with?" broke from Handy Harry's lips.

"The wild man!" exclaimed Rocks. "That critter saved my life only yesterday."

It was indeed Scar-Face, the deformed, who confronted the fortune-hunter of the silent tongue, and the madman seemed to be in a perfect frenzy of fury. Once or twice he started toward Seth with his claw-like hands outstretched, the fingers working convulsively, as if he longed to bury them in the flesh of the silent man's throat. Slowly Seth retreated when the other advanced. The scarred creature was talking swiftly, rolling out his words with a swift incoherency that almost baffled understanding. The three unbidden spectators could not understand a word that came from his lips.

Near by the two men a horse wearing neither saddle nor bridle was standing, regarding the scene in a manner that appeared almost human in its intelligence. The horse was coal black, sleek and glossy, a most beautiful animal.

"There is going to be trouble there!" exclaimed the card-sharp, as he watched the two men. "We had better go forward, for Seth may need our aid."

Barely had he said this when, of a sudden, the madman leaped sraight at Silent Seth's throat, uttering a snarling roar. He grasped the fortune-seeker with those claw-like hands, shook him as a dog might shake a dead rat, and then hurled him to the ground and kicked him with both feet!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BLUE COAT CHIEF BREAKS A-PLEDGE.

THE deformed creature's movements had been so swift that not one of the spectators was able to do anything to stop him or even utter a shout, which might have caused him to hold his hand. Snarling and frothing like a mad dog, the scar-faced being repeatedly kicked Silent Seth as the unfortunate man lay on the ground where he had been hurled.

"Good God!" gasped Handy Harry, and then, jerking out a revolver, he started toward the furious maniac, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Cum' on, pard!" cried Montana Jim, as he sprang forward in the sport's tracks, Rocks following.

Scar-Face heard Harry's cry and wheeled

toward the oncoming sport. For an instant he seemed astonished as he saw three men running toward him. He appeared to hesitate as to whether he would fly or stand his ground, and at first it seemed that he would do the latter, for he actually took one or two steps toward those who were hastening to reach him. Then he halted and flung up his claw-like hands with an indescribable gesture which seemed to express a desire to fasten those crooked fingers upon their throats. At the same time he snarled out some words which they could not understand; but, a moment later, he wheeled again and, with two or three great bounds, alighted upon the back of the black horse.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Wildly his fiendish laugh rung through the rocky ravine, as, swift as thought, the horse sprang away, that huge, ape-like figure clinging to its bare back.

With an exclamation of rage and disappointment, Handy Harry began emptying his revolver at the escaping wild man. The sport was a tolerably good shot, but for some reason all his bullets were wasted on that occasion, for not one of the singing bits of lead touched the black horse or its uncanny rider. It almost appeared that both the beast and its burden bore charmed lives.

The card-sharp swore roundly as the hammer of his revolver fell with a dull click on an empty shell, and still the horse sped on, putting a greater distance between them every moment. Turning to his two comrades, Harry shouted:

"Shoot the fiend—shoot him! Why in blazes don't you let him have it?"

But before either of them could throw his rifle to his shoulder, the black horse swept round a bend and was out of sight. An instant later two pistol-shots, fired just beyond the bend, came to their ears, telling them that the man of the scarred face had probably met some one there just beyond their sight. With a cry, Harry sprang away toward the bend, and, in their excitement, feeling sure that exciting scenes were transpiring near at hand, the scout and the old prospector forgot that Seth might be injured, and followed the sport as fast as they could.

When Handy Harry reached the bend he was surprised to see a strange man standing a short distance away gazing down the ravine, and evidently listening to the clattering hoof-beats of a galloping horse that had passed out of sight beyond still another bend. The man was the mysterious leader of the Blue Coats, Captain Nameless. In his right hand he held a revolver, and his wide-brimmed hat lay on the ground at his feet.

The sport halted in surprise as he saw the blue-coated figure, for he had hoped to find the scar-faced creature there. Captain Nameless did not seem to know that any one had appeared round the bend, for he muttered loud enough for the card-sharp to hear:

"Go it, you devil! I will have better luck next time! I wonder who and what you are. Anyway, I know that you seem determined to kill me, but you have failed every time, although this was a close call."

Then he stooped and picked up his hat, and Harry's keen eyes noted that there was a bullet-hole through the crown.

At that moment Montana Jim and the scout came panting to Harry's side, gasping:

"Where is he?"

Captain Nameless heard them and turned swiftly, the revolver in his gloved hand covering them in an instant.

"Hold!" he commanded, sternly. "Who are you?"

"Honest men," was the card-sharp's instant retort. "Can you say as much of yourself?"

The chief of the Blue Coats surveyed them several moments in silence, then, with a bow which seemed half a mockery, he said:

"Ah! I seem to remember you. I think I met you once before early in the day. At that time I warned you of the dangers which surround you, but received scant courtesy and no thanks for my trouble. Well, what do you want?"

"We were pursuing that scar-faced demon," the sport hastened to explain. "I fear he has severely injured one of our comrades."

"Well, if that gentleman is the one you are looking after," said Captain Nameless, something like laughter in his voice, "I fancy you will have to go further, for he has passed out of sight and bearing beyond that bend. I met him here, and it came very near being a serious meeting for me, as you can see by this hole in my sombrero."

"Yes, we heard the shots and hastened here, hoping that some one had downed the fiend."

"He is a very hard creature to down. I fancy that some of you had a trial at him, if anything can be told by the shooting and shouting which I heard. I was hurrying forward to see what it all meant, when he came round the bend on me. I had not drawn my revolver, but he had one in his hand and he blazed away as he saw me, putting this hole in my hat. I got my gun out as soon as possible and gave him one in return, but the lead was wasted. He seems to bear a charmed life."

"You are right," acknowledged Handy Harry, bitterly, as he began to load the chambers of his empty revolver. "I wasted a little lead on him myself, but not a pill seemed to come anywhere near him."

Captain Nameless had lowered his revolver, and thrust it into his pocket without reloading the empty chamber. As soon as he saw who they were, he seemed to care very little for the three men before him.

"I presume you are becoming aware that I did not lie to you when I told you that you were surrounded by danger?" he observed, giving his words just a bit of a rising inflection.

Not one of the three replied. For several moments they were silent as if studying the strange man of the blue coat and mask, then Montana Jim blurted out:

"Whar's thet gal?"

The chief of the mountain masks started a little, but instantly asked:

"What did you say, sir?"

"I axed ye whar thet gal is."

"Girl—what girl? Make your meaning plain."

"Reckon you know w'at I mean well ernuff," said Jim, doggedly. "You took her erway frum Dingle's crowd. It'll take gall ter deny thet."

For an instant only did Captain Nameless seem to hesitate, then he replied:

"Yes, I did rescue a young lady from those desperadoes and cut-throats, but she can be nothing to you."

"How do ye know thet?"

"Something tells me so; but I wonder how you knew anything about the rescue."

"We saw it. We war layin' ter git her out o' thet fix ourselves w'hen you chipped into the game an' raked ther pot. Thet's ther hull o' it."

"Are you particular friends of the young lady?" asked the mask. "I have reasons to think not."

"Waal, I dunno ez we're 'tickler frien's o' hern," faltered the prospector; then he rapped out with a sudden vehemence that was startling: "Yes, by glory, we are, too! We are frien's ter every blessed petticoated shemale on ther hull round face o' ther 'arth, an' 'tickler friends ter them as is hansum."

"On the other hand," came slowly from beneath the blue mask, as the man lifted his hat and smoothed back his long hair with one gloved hand, "I am the friend of none of them. I treat them with the courtesy due a human being—nothing more. They are all base, treacherous creatures! Ah-r-ha!" and a sound came from his hidden lips that was far from pleasant. "I am a man without a heart and without a name, and a woman's treachery is the cause of it all."

Not one of the three spoke, for there was something about this declaration that silenced them all. After a few moments, Captain Nameless continued:

"You demand the girl. Very well: she shall decide. She is safe in my hidden home. I will go to her and tell her who and what you are—for I know you well—and she shall say if she will trust herself in your hands. If she wishes to go with you, I will bring her here; if not, I pledge myself to return before it is dark and let you know her answer. Do not fail me, but remain in this vicinity. I will surely return. It is useless for one of you to attempt to follow me and learn where my hidden home is, for the trick cannot be worked, and the spy would simply have his death on his own hands. Farewell for the present."

Turning, he walked deliberately away, not once glancing over his shoulder, but not one of them made a move to stop or follow him.

"Waal," said Jim, when the mysterious chief of the Blue Coats had vanished from view, "I reckon we'd better go back an' see if Seth is dead or alive."

But when they reached the spot where Seth had been attacked by the madman, not a sign of the silent fortune-seeker could they find. He had departed while they were conversing with Captain Nameless.

"Waal, of all ther durned fool tricks!" blurted the veteran miner. "I never saw sech a feller!"

"It is evident that he does not desire to associate with such common trash as we are any longer," laughed Handy Harry. "I think he could not have been badly hurt to sneak away like this."

Jim shook his head.

"I don't understan' it nohow," he declared. "Pr'aps he's somewhar near."

But although they searched everywhere in that vicinity, they found nothing of the strange silent man. They were finally forced to give up the hunt and wait for the promised return of Captain Nameless.

They were all very hungry, and Rocks declared that he would have some kind of game or tramp his legs off, with which he left them. In less than an hour and a half he returned with a small black-tailed fawn which he had succeeded in shooting with his revolver, using that weapon because the report would not be heard as far as the report of a rifle. Their supper was assured, but they decided not to cook any of the

meat till after dark, as the smoke of the fire could not be seen at that time by foes.

Darkness came at last, but Captain Nameless failed to appear. Slowly and with reluctance the three came to the conclusion that the mysterious man had deliberately broken his pledge.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SILENT MAN AND SCAR-FACE.

SILENT SETH had determined to slip away from his friends at the earliest opportunity after his meeting with Black Jack, the man of the midnight eyes and coal-black beard. He did not wish his companions to know that he thought of leaving them, for he knew that they would ask innumerable questions, and if there was anything that he despised it was to be questioned. But how he was to get away without being caught in the act was a puzzler. He could think of no feasible plan, and was forced to accompany the three, hanging in the rear, and wait for an opportunity to present itself.

It would be doing the silent man an injustice to think that he contemplated any treacherous move toward those who had been his friends thus far in their wild hunt for fortune, or even that he meant to desert them for good. In truth, he had an object in view, and when that object was attained, he meant to return and rejoin his partners.

Neither Montana Jim or Handy Harry had ever fully understood their still-tongued comrade. In more ways than one he was a mystery to them—his very silence was an enigma that they could not solve, for when he did speak it was evident that he was a man of education and could be a fluent talker if he chose. Although his aspect was gloomy and far from attractive, he was never sulky. When it became absolutely necessary for him to say something, it was always said in a pleasant and agreeable manner. Those who knew him well felt that there was some secret cause for his silent manner—a cause which they could not hope to discover.

He rode quietly along behind his friends till they were joined by the friendly Crow. When they halted, he was a short distance in the rear, still watching for an opportunity to slip quietly away. They started forward with Rocks and the Indian in advance, Jim and Harry following close behind those on foot. Then Seth believed that the chance he was looking for had come, and he remained sitting quietly on his horse and watched them till they were quite out of sight.

"Now to find John again," he muttered, and reining his horse round, he started back over the course that he had traveled with the little party.

As soon as he thought that he was at a safe distance so that the hoof-beats of his horse would not be heard by those whom he had so lately left, he put the animal into a gallop. He knew well enough that his friends might discover his absence at any moment, and he wished to be as far away as possible when they did so.

It was not very long before he reached the place where he had had that stormy meeting with the man of the dark beard, and, without knowing why he did so, he drew rein an instant.

"I have hunted everywhere for them," he muttered, gazing around him; "but I little thought that they might be amid these mountains. He is here, and where *he* is, there *she* must be unless she is dead!"

The thought seemed to give him pain, for he placed his hand to his heart and breathed heavily for a moment, becoming white to the lips.

"My God!" he groaned, suddenly holding his right hand up before him as if the member was accursed. "What is not that hand responsible for! But for that one stroke, all this misery would never have existed! And that hand did it—that hand! I am responsible for the wretchedness of many human hearts. Yet, I struck in self-defense."

His head had dropped on his breast and his eyes were closed for a brief space of time, during which he appeared like one in a trance. Finally, he looked up again, and a resolute light shone in his eyes.

"I will find him again," he declared. "Then I will tell him all, and beg to see her. I can make no reparation—the day for that is past—but I can show them that I am truly penitent and that I hate myself for my cowardice at the time when he was standing in the place which I should have occupied. But for my cowardice then, all that afterward happened might have been averted. If I had come forward and given myself up, or if he had but told the truth instead of trying to shelter me by sacrificing himself, all might have been well. He was ever loyal and true, while I—I was a miserable coward!"

Suddenly he spurred the horse on along the ravine once more. He urged the animal into a gallop, seeming in a mad hurry to get somewhere. Once he cast a look over his shoulder, as if fearing that his friends might have turned back and be even then in sight. After a time he halted at the foot of a place where the sloping side of the ravine might be scaled by a man and gazed at the place for several moments.

"Something tells me that he went up there," he muttered.

Then, with a shout, he urged his horse toward the bank. The gallant animal obeyed and was soon scrambling upward, slipping, sliding, catching a hold, straining and creeping, every moment appearing on the point of falling and rolling back into the ravine, but still gradually getting further up. It was something of a miracle that the top was reached in safety, but the horse finally gained the victory and stood with lowered head and heaving sides.

"Good boy!" exclaimed its master, who seemed to delight in talking to himself and occasionally addressing the animal, now that he was alone. "You did well and shall not be compelled to bear a burden for a short time, at least."

With this he dismounted and went forward, leading the animal. For some time he proceeded in that manner, then he remounted and rode on.

He found the ground very broken, and it was with great difficulty that he was able to get along at all, and that at nothing but the slowest pace. But after a long time he descended into another shallow gorge. Along this he rode at a more rapid pace, although the ground was not fit for such traveling. In the end he paid for his folly, for the animal stumbled and threw him over its head. The unfortunate man struck heavily and lay still, quite unconscious.

After a very long time he stirred, uttered a faint groan and then sat up. In a moment he comprehended what had happened and put his hand to his head. When he took it away there was some blood upon it, by which he knew that he must have struck violently against a stone, thus stunning him for a time. He looked for his horse, but the animal was not in sight.

"Injured and deserted," he said, with a feeble attempt to smile, something that he never indulged in when with human beings. "But, thank fortune! my head is not badly hurt, if I can tell anything by the way it feels."

He arose to his feet without any difficulty and picked up his rifle from where it had fallen when he was hurled over the horse's head. Swinging the valued Winchester to his back once more, he started to find his horse.

It is not necessary to describe his wanderings while searching for the animal, which he was unable to find, but which by a strange chance came into the possession of the sport, Handy Harry. Late in the afternoon the hungry and tired man found himself in the ravine which he had left hours before, and with a sigh of disappointment sat down upon a small boulder.

Barely had Silent Seth thus seated himself when a coal-black horse, bearing a hump-backed and scar-faced rider, came into sight. As the bridleless horse bore the singular creature down toward him, Seth sprung to his feet and swung his rifle round ready for use, a movement which the unknown seemed to entirely disregard.

"Hold!" cried the silent man. "Who are you?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" burst from the lips of the hideous being, as the black horse seemed to stop of its own accord. "Who am I? Don't you know me? Ugh-r-r-gh!" with a horrible indrawing of his breath. "I am an imp of darkness—an evil spirit, so the red men say. I am Scar-Face, the Mountain Monarch. Who are you?"

In an instant Seth decided that the man before him was mad. He did not appear to be armed, and for that reason seemed harmless enough, so the silent man lowered his rifle.

"I am a friend to all honest men."

The hunchback slid from the horse and stood regarding Seth in a peculiar manner, his eyes gleaming with a strange light which seemed almost to indicate that he knew the quiet fortune-seeker.

"I am a friend to no one but the devil!" came hissing from the lips of the deformed. "I hate the world—I hate life—I hate everything! But, mark my words, worse than all else I hate a woman—a woman with a false heart and a fair face! Do you know such a one?"

Seth shook his head.

"That is strange," declared the man of the fire-marked features. "I know one, and I will take you to her if you would like to see her. She has white hair—white hair! 'Twas golden once—golden and beautiful! I was caught in its silken meshes, but the woman was false—treacherous! She had blue eyes—ah-a! so have you! *They are her eyes!*" he fairly snarled, starting forward, with his claw-like hands outstretched, causing Seth to retreat a step. "Where did you get her treacherous eyes? Tell me—tell me before I tear them from your head and grind them beneath my feet! Where did you get Lyla's eyes?"

At that name the silent man staggered back as if struck a blow in the face.

"Lyla!" he gasped—"Lyla! Who in God's name are you that speaks her name?"

"I—I am the man she ensnared and then deceived! I am the blasted wreck of a handsome man! Look at me! Am I not a creature for the scorn and contempt of the world? Her treachery made me what I am! And you have her eyes! Where did you get them, I say! Tell me that or I will snatch them from your head!"

"My God!" exclaimed Seth. "I know you now! You are Rupert Weston!"

"You know me!" sibilated the crouching monster. "You call me by my name of long ago! Her eyes stare at me from your head! I will have them! You shall die!"

And then, like a leaping tiger, he launched himself upon the silent man!

CHAPTER XXVI.

SETH RECEIVES A SHOCK.

So swift had been the spring of the scar-faced creature that Seth was taken almost by surprise and hurled to the earth before he could make anything but a feeble resistance. Then he felt the maniac's feet as the deformed kicked him repeatedly, snarling and growling like a wild animal all the while. Next the rapid rattle of Handy Harry's revolver and the sport's lusty shouts came to his ears. He saw the disfigured being who had called himself the Mountain Monarch bound away and spring upon the back of the black horse, which seemed to be impatiently waiting to carry him away. Then, with that wild laugh floating behind them, horse and rider flew from the oncoming men.

Seth was not badly hurt, and with a feeling of fascination he watched the deformed figure till it disappeared beyond the bend. A moment later he heard the two pistol-shots which also reached the ears of the men who had arrived just in time to save him from the fury of the enraged Scar-Face. Seth expected that his late companions would stop when they reached his side, and was much surprised when they failed to do so. However, when they had vanished beyond the bend, he arose with a long-drawn breath of satisfaction.

"So much the better for me," he muttered. "I do not want to meet them now anyway, for they have seen enough to set them to asking a hundred questions. I will get away before they return."

Picking up his rifle, he looked around for a place to leave the ravine. Fortune favored him, for near at hand he saw a place where he could scale the sloping wall with little difficulty. This he at once did, and then hastened along to a place where he could look down into the ravine beyond the bend. There he saw his three friends talking with the man of mystery, Captain Nameless.

"Who is he?" Seth asked himself, taking good care to keep back so that he would not be seen if either of the four should happen to glance up. "There is something about that singular man that makes me almost certain that I have met him. I wonder what has become of Rupert Weston, for that scar-faced man was surely the so-called handsome gentleman of days long gone by."

He watched those below him till Captain Nameless left the others, but he was not able to catch enough of their talk to get the full meaning of it. When the little scout and Seth's two fortune-seeking friends had gone back beyond the bend, the silent man wheeled about and hurried away, following the course of the ravine and trying to keep the chief of the Blue Coats in view.

"I feel that if I can but follow that man he will lead me to something that I am desirous of finding," he muttered. "If he would only take me to John—or to her! I am near those for whom I have searched so long. They are somewhere amid these wilds, and I am confident that I shall find them at last."

"I little thought of meeting the wreck of Lyla's husband here. They said he was a very handsome man in the long ago, but God knows he is hideous enough now! And I—I am the cause of it all! But for that blow and my cowardice, John Drake would not be the wretched outcast that he is to-day and Rupert Weston's face would be free of scars. But for my cowardice—my treachery to the one who was always more than a brother!—Lyla would be happy with her husband at this moment. My God! what misery won't I have to answer for at the Judgment Bar!"

It was plain that the man was filled with remorse for the past—memories of which seemed to be constantly stirring within his breast. It did not seem so very strange that he was a silent, gloomy man. To judge by his mutterings, not only were his hands stained with blood, but he had been the wrecker of several lives by some act of cowardice.

Seth did his best to keep the chief of the Blue Coats in view and did very well for a time. Captain Nameless finally left the ravine, after which his pursuer had greater difficulty in following him, and at last lost him quite.

Once more the silent man became an aimless wanderer, that is to say, he knew not which way to turn to find those for whom he was seeking. For nearly an hour he roamed about in this manner, at the end of which time he suddenly found himself confronted by one of the persons he was seeking. Black Jack stood leaning on a long rifle and regarding him with a look of undisguised hatred.

"Ah!" cried Seth: "I have found you!"

"You have," acknowledged the dark man,

slowly; "a thing which I warned you against. You are losing your judgment, Seth."

"No, no, no! I could not rest till I had found you. I want to tell you how sorry I am for the past—"

"Stop!" leaped like a shot from the midst of that black beard. "Sorry! For God's sake if you set the least value on your life, do not speak of the past to me! You will fill me with such uncontrollable rage that I shall brain you on the spot!" And then, with a great effort, he lowered his voice as he said, very slowly: "You miserable coward!"

Seth's face turned very white, but he did not resent the epithet. Instead, he bowed his head, saying humbly:

"Yes, I am a miserable coward, and I deserve your scorn and contempt. I know that well enough, and you cannot despise me more than I despise myself. Yet you are—"

"Stop!" Black Jack once more commanded. "Have a care, man! The ties of blood are nothing now! But for my hatred of you, you are no more to me than a dog. I have spared your life once; if you are wise, you will go away, so that I shall not be tempted to regret my clemency."

"I cannot go away till I have seen her."

For a moment the man of the black beard stared at the other in amazement. Then he asked, very slowly:

"Would you look upon the one whose life and happiness you and I together have wrecked? I had a hand in the black work, but you were responsible for it all. Would you look upon the wreck you have made?"

"Yes, yes! take me to her, that on my knees at her feet I may tell her of my regret for the past."

Black Jack hesitated, seeming to revolve the request in his mind. His dark eyes were fixed intently on the face of the one who begged the favor of him, and, as they stood thus face to face, it was once more plainly evident that they were strangely alike in form and feature, the greatest difference being in the color of their eyes and beard.

Finally, the dark-bearded man spoke:

"No, you shall not go to her and fling yourself at her feet. She has suffered enough without bearing any more, and she would be far from pleased to see you. I shall have to deny your request, Seth."

A pitiful look of pleading settled upon the face of the silent man, as he held out his hands appealingly.

"For God's sake, John," he cried, "do not deny me the privilege of looking on her face once more before I die! It is not at all probable that we shall ever meet again after I leave these mountains. Will you deny me this last request? If you will not allow me to speak to her, then take me where I can see her without being seen myself. Surely that is a little thing to ask, and you can grant me so small a favor. Put yourself in my place! I beg you not to refuse!"

A sudden thought seemed to strike the man who had listened impassively to this appeal, and after a moment of hesitation, he said:

"You shall see her on conditions."

Seth started forward, eagerly crying:

"Name them! I must see her at any cost."

"Mind you," came slowly from Black Jack's lips, "I am not going to take you to her out of any good will I may bear you or because of our relation in the past; but I am taking you to her that you may gaze upon your handiwork. But you must promise that you will not speak to her and will guard against betraying your presence by any sound or exclamation. Do you promise that?"

"Yes—anything!"

"You must also promise," the dark-bearded man quietly continued, "that you will never attempt to return to the place where you see her. In no way will you try to find her again. Do you promise?"

"I do."

"Then follow me."

Straight from that spot Black Jack led the way to the little pocket where, beneath the cliff and vines, nestled the hidden hut. With Seth at his heels the black-bearded man descended the steep path. When they had reached the bottom, he turned to the one he was piloting, saying:

"Remain here a moment."

Then he hurried away to peer into the cabin, the door of which was still open. He disappeared beneath the vines, but soon stepped forth again and motioned for Seth to approach, and the silent man did so with a mingled feeling of eagerness and reluctance. When he reached Black Jack's side, that individual touched him lightly on the arm, whispering warningly:

"Remember your promise; guard your tongue."

But for these words Seth surely would have betrayed himself when he had passed beyond the trailing vines and looked into the gloomy cabin through the open door. For an instant his eyes were unable to penetrate the shadows, but they quickly grew accustomed to the place, and he discerned a figure reclining on a low couch. What first attracted his attention was a mass of snow-white hair, then, after a moment, he made out the form of the weird-appearing wild wo-

man whom he had previously seen in the midnight moonlight. As he gazed upon that haggard face, he gasped:

"Great God! that cannot be Lyla!"

"Hush!" commanded the man at his side, in a fierce whisper. "That is Lyla. Look upon the work of your hands and mine!"

But, as if horrified, the silent man placed his hands over his eyes and kept repeating, "My God! my God!" Black Jack watched him closely, but said nothing more. Finally Seth lowered his hands and looked into the hut once more. For several moments he stood gazing at the woman, who was sleeping on the couch, unconscious of their presence. Suddenly, she gave a weak toss of her arms and cried out pitifully, but did not awake. At this Seth staggered back as if struck, and then turned and passed beyond the vines, followed by the dark-faced man.

"Have you seen enough?" demanded the owner of the hidden hut, as he reached the other's side.

"Enough, enough!" groaned the shaken man. "She was handsome in the long ago. It does not seem possible that she can have changed thus."

"That white-haired woman, whose mind is shattered and broken, is the once beautiful Lyla. You have seen her and have promised never to return to this spot. See that you keep your promise, if you value your life."

The silent man turned and looked the other fairly in the face.

"If I value my life!" he repeated. "John Drake, the day has passed when I set a value on my life, and I have ceased to be a coward. I hate myself for the black record I have made, and, could I do so, would suffer a hundred deaths to undo the past. But I find myself helpless to make any reparation for my false moves. There is nothing for me but an embittered life, a lonely death and a deserted grave, unmarked by a slab. I know that I have cruelly wronged you and Lyla, but I can do nothing to right that wrong. Fate has been very cruel to us all."

"Do you call it fate?" bitterly.

But Seth did not heed the question. With a terrible calmness, he added:

"I am going away now. I shall keep my promise and never return. Good-by, John."

But the dark-faced man gazed sternly at him, saying coldly:

"Go!"

Sadly he bowed his head and turned away, climbing the steep path without one backward glance. Silently the stern man of the lonely pocket watched him till he disappeared from view.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SEARCHING FOR THE LOST ONES.

VIONA BURKE little dreamed that the blood-stain beneath her head as she lay on the couch within the cavern chamber where the White Rose had found her was left there by her father, who had lain in that same spot less than an hour before. Shortly after being brought to the cave by Max and Victor the unfortunate gentleman recovered consciousness and heard the two young men excitedly discussing the strange disappearance of the maiden they had left there when they went to get the horses. For a few moments the rancher lay quite still, wondering where he was and how he came there. By the flaring light from the fire he recognized his son and the young lawyer.

"Max!"

In an instant the young man was by his father's side.

"You are conscious, daddy," calling him the name always used in boyhood. "You are not badly hurt?"

"I don't know," faltered Dave. "My head feels bad."

"Sure it must; and I was so heedless to leave you a moment. But she is gone, and in my excitement I forgot that you were hurt. She was here when we left the cave a short time ago."

With sudden strength, Dave sat up, crying:

"She—who? Hev ye found my darlin' Vio? Speak quick, lad! Whar is the gal?"

"There, there, daddy!" gently pressing him back upon the couch. "Do not get excited. It was not Vio, but I am sure that sister is near, for Victor has seen her. Now let me look at your head and see how badly you are hurt."

With much reluctance Burke allowed his son to examine the wound, for he was very excited at finding himself with Max, and learning that Viona was near. The young rancher soon discovered that the wound was not a dangerous one, although the scalp had been cut not far from one temple in a manner which seemed to indicate that the unfortunate man had been struck by a falling object.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

"I scarcely know," was the reply. "I was riding along close to an overhanging wall, when I wuz struck suddint like, an' knocked forrard onto ther neck of my hawse. I clung thar while ther critter kerried me along as fast as he could skin, for he 'peared to be frightened. But ther blow wuz too much, an' arter a time I fell to the groun', strikin' so solid that it completely knocked me daft. I never knew another thing till I foun' myself hyer."

"You were probably struck by a falling stone. At least the wound seems to indicate that such was the case. It was fortunate that we found you. Bring me some water, Vic, please."

The young lawyer hastened to bring a canteen of water, and Max carefully bathed and bandaged his father's head. The old man was anxious to learn how he came to be there with the two young men, and, when Max had explained, he asked:

"Who is this girl that you say orter be hyer in the cave?"

With a few words Max also explained about the strange maiden who had saved his life. Then he asked his father to tell how he came there amid the mountains, and Burke soon made it plain that he had slipped away from the friends in whose care his son had placed him, and followed the trail of the two young men till he lost it amid the mountains.

"I couldn't bear ther thort of keepin' still w'ile Vio wuz in danger," he declared. "I thort perhap' I could help ye in some way erbout savin' her, an' so I kem. Do ye say Leclair has seen her? Whar—w'en?"

Then Victor was obliged to tell his story, which he did, with slight variations, making the girl's danger appear as small as possible, and her final rescue a certainty. But Dave Burke was not easily deceived.

"Don't try ter hide ennything frum me," he entreated. "I want ter know ther wu'st. See," and he suddenly sat up, "I am strong—as strong as ever. My head feels a little bad, but that don't matter."

Indeed, he appeared to be quite recovered from the effect of the wound he had received, and, but for the cloth about his head, one might never have suspected that there was anything the matter with him. He listened eagerly while the two young men discussed the situation. Finally Max turned to him, saying:

"We are going out to get the horses, daddy, and to look for the beautiful girl who saved my life. You had better remain here while we are away from the cave. She may return. You will be securing the rest which you must need."

But Burke would not hear to such an arrangement. He insisted on accompanying them, declaring that he was quite able to do so. They might find Viona and need his help to rescue her. He would go mad if he were forced to stay in that dismal place.

When he found that it could not be averted, Max consented for his father to accompany them, but first he made the old man eat something. Then they once more left the cave. Had they remained there thirty minutes more they would have been reunited with both of the girls for whom they were going forth to search.

Once more beneath the scudding clouds, Victor took the lead. Steadily and silently they pressed on till they reached the spot where they had found the unlucky rancher. Passing this, they still went forward.

But Victor found it much more difficult to return to the place where he had left the horses than he had anticipated. For some time he was at fault and they appeared to be wandering aimlessly. But, at last, when they least expected it, they came upon the place where they had camped the night before.

"Ah!" exclaimed Victor. "The horses are close at hand."

But he was mistaken, for when they looked for the animals where he had left them it was found that they were gone, and a close examination showed they had not broken away of their own accord but had been found by human beings and taken away.

"This puts us in a bad fix," said the young lawyer, gloomily. "We must have horses to get out of this wild land. Our case looks desperate indeed."

The others were forced to confess that he spoke the truth, but Max was inclined to be cheerful, saying that they would secure other horses in some way. Their first thought must be to find Rose and Viona.

When Victor looked for Max's rifle he was delighted to find that the ones who took the horses had not found it. With the trusty Winchester in his hands once more, the young rancher felt even more encouraged.

"We are going to pull through this scrape all right," he declared, with confidence. "Our greatest difficulty will be to find and rescue Viona, for something seems to tell me that we shall find Rose when we return to the cave. She had probably gone out for some reason, and that was why we did not find her there. She knows this entire section like a book, and we may depend on it that she will get back to the cave sooner or later."

His words gave Victor renewed courage. They were about to move away when Max uttered a low, warning hiss and drew then back into the shadows.

"I hear steps!" he whispered. "Lay low!"

They crouched in the deepest darkness, and it was fortunate for them that the moon was hidden behind a dense black cloud at that moment, for suddenly several shadowy figures appeared close at hand.

They were Indian warriors!

Silently as so many phantoms they glided by, each following in the tracks of the leader. Our friends held their breath, gripping their weapons, quite prepared to make a desperate fight if they were discovered. But fortune favored them, for not one of the seven warriors dreamed of their presence. On went the dark figures till they were swallowed up by the night.

"Thank fortune!" gasped Victor; "they did not see us. We should have been in a bad box if they had."

"You are right," Max admitted, in a low tone. "But we would have given them a warm time if they had smelled us out."

"Hark!" Again they listened and once more they heard advancing footsteps. What new danger threatened them? Deep down in the shadows they crouched again, with ears and eyes wide open. The footsteps, less cautious than the red-skins, came nearer, and another party passed. But this time the night prowlers were white. They seemed to be following the Indians.

"Who were they?" whispered Victor, when the second party had passed beyond hearing.

"Outlaws, I reckon," replied the young rancher.

"But they were following the reds."

"Still I believe them outlaws. There is deviltry of some kind afoot."

Both parties had gone back toward the narrow pass through which the three men had reached that spot. It seemed dangerous to follow in the footsteps of the outlaws and Indians, for at any point they might come upon them unawares. Max believed that he could lead them to the cave by a course different than the one by which they had reached that spot, and they intrusted themselves to his judgment. It was a false step, for they became lost amid the network of small gorges and ravines in that section, and morning found them still searching for the cave.

Suddenly a man appeared on an elevation some distance away and stood for a few moments in the full glow of the rising sun. He was compactly built and wore a long black beard. He was seen but a moment, then he disappeared.

"Great Heaven!" came hoarsely from Dave Burke's lips. "That man here! I have hoped him dead. Does he want Viona? By my soul! he shall not have her! She is mine—my child—and if we find her again, nothing shall tear her from me!"

Both of the young men looked at the excited speaker in amazement. What did those wildly-spoken words mean?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HAWK EYE'S FATE—THE BATTLE UNDER-GROUND.

A CRY of amazement and terror broke from the lips of the two girls, Rose and Viona, as they saw the form of a red warrior standing in the arched opening of the cavern chamber revealed by the light of the flaring, lurching flames in the natural fire-place. The golden-haired maiden covered her face with her hands, but her dusky companion sprang to her feet and seized an old rifle which leaned against the rocky wall close by, determined to make a desperate defense. But at this moment, with uplifted hands and outward turned palms, the red-skin stepped boldly into the chamber.

"Gals not be scart," he said, in a friendly tone.

"Injun not hurt. Him friend."

With a feeling of surprise and relief, Rose perceived that the savage was not in war-paint and was not a Sioux.

"Who are you?" she demanded, still holding the heavy rifle ready for use.

"Me Hawk Eye, Crow; me friendly. Me white gal's friend. Hate bad white men; know where good ones am. Black-eyed gal him not shoot Hawk Eye."

But Rose was still mistrustful, although she lowered the rifle a little.

"Hawk Eye stay there and not come nearer," she commanded, unwittingly falling into the Indian's manner of speech. "The White Rose does not trust the Crow. Sioux warriors hate Crows; say they are treacherous."

The red-skin made a gesture of contempt.

"Sioux dogs!" he grunted, scornfully. "Hawk Eye know um long time—hate um! Hawk Eye know good pale-faces hunt for white gal with sun-hair. See sky-coat men carry gal 'way. Hawk Eye him foller. Lose sky-coat men, no find where um go. Him see night-haired gal come here, him foller, find other gal. Heap good!"

"What is that he says?" eagerly asked Viona, who had uncovered her face. "I cannot understand it all. What does he mean?"

"He says he is friendly to the pale-faces," Rose replied; "and he claims to know where there are friends who are searching for you."

Viona sprang up eagerly.

"Oh! perhaps he knows where Max and Victor are! He may be a good Indian."

At this Hawk Eye smiled and nodded, saying: "Heap good! Hawk Eye him no hurt; him take to white gal's friends."

"He may be deceiving us," said Rose, speaking to her companion in a low tone. "I am afraid to trust him."

"Ask him to describe my friends."

Rose did so, and Hawk Eye said:

"One old man, bones all knots, look like heap hard fight. Young little man, wear buckskin, him scout, Small Rocks. 'Nother young man, him face look good, eyes sharp like eagle's, all talk, talk, talk, say nothing. 'Nother have hair all over face, sky eyes, no stay long, go 'way heap quick, don't know where."

"They are not my friends," sighed Viona, when she had listened to the rude description. "I do not know them."

Hawk Eye looked disappointed.

"Gal not know them," he repeated. "They gal's friends; git her 'way, take her where she have home."

"Perhaps so; but I have other friends near whom I must see."

"Other friends?" repeated the Crow, looking sharply at her. "Where um be?"

"They are near."

"Mebbe um come soon?"

"I hope so."

"Good! Then all go where other friends am. Big lot heap hard fight; Sioux dogs no whip um."

This was logic, as both of the girls could plainly see, and they admitted that when their friends returned they might go with him to join the party of which he spoke. This seemed to satisfy the friendly, and he said:

"Hawk Eye wait for um. Him much hungry. Not got anything to eat for big long time. Gals got nothing?"

After a moment's hesitation, Rose directed him to be seated on one of the wolf-skins; then she brought forth such food as had been stored in the cave, consisting almost entirely of dried meat. But barely had Hawk Eye taken a mouthful when he paused and listened, then his hand fell upon his tomahawk and he sprang up like a cat, wheeling toward the entrance to the chamber. Then he fell back with an exclamation of dismay.

In the darkness just beyond the open arch stood seven Sioux warriors, their hands grasping their knives and tomahawks, and their eyes gleaming with a look of savage triumph!

At that moment the girls saw the painted figures beyond the arch, and a cry of terror broke from Viona's white lips. Rose wheeled on Hawk Eye with the fury of an enraged tigress.

"Treacherous dog!" she exclaimed, with flashing eyes.

The Indian crouched in his tracks, his tomahawk grasped in his hand. He did not take his eyes off the dusky figures just beyond the arch, as he replied, proudly:

"Hawk Eye not crooked. Night Eyes think so; she see how him can fight Sioux dogs."

In another moment the painted warriors were swarming into the chamber. A wild war-cry pealed from the Crow's lips, and was echoed by his Sioux enemies. Then, without the least hesitation, Hawk Eye sprang into the midst of his foes, striking right and left with a terrible fury. The cavern resounded with the savage cries of the contending men. The Sioux made a united effort to destroy their hated foe, but Hawk Eye was not going to die without letting them feel the power of his arm. Cut and bleeding, he slashed on all sides, sending one of his enemies to the rocky floor with a cloven skull and another with wounds from which he would never recover. The Crow seemed possessed with a demon. Back and forth he dodged, his hatchet making a circle around his head, his terrible cries echoing the loudest of all the horrible sounds which filled the cave. He was dripping with blood, but he did not seem to heed his wounds in the least. To his enemies it seemed that he was almost more than human.

It is impossible to describe the emotions of the two girls as they watched the wonderful movements of the fighting Crow. The scene was horrible but fascinating. Every moment they expected to see him fall, but he still kept on his feet and fought with what appeared to be undiminished energy. From head to foot he seemed to be covered with blood.

But Hawk Eye's foes were too many for him. Had there been half the number, he might have exterminated them, even though he did so at the sacrifice of his own life. As it was, there could be but one termination to the unequal conflict. Suddenly, with one last wild cry, he hurled his tomahawk straight into the face of one of the painted warriors and then fell back, dead almost before his body touched the ground.

Then Rose turned away, covering her face with her hands, and Viona closed her eyes. Neither of the girls could bear to witness the terrible act of triumph which they knew was sure to follow—the taking of the conquered brave's scalp. A savage yell of triumph rung along the underground passages, but it was followed by one of grief, as the victors gazed upon their two dead comrades. Not one of the seven had escaped without wounds of some kind.

Suddenly Rose felt a hand on her shoulder.

"The White Rose wanders far from the wigwams of her people," said a well-known and hated voice close to her ear.

She whirled, throwing the hand from her shoulder and exclaiming:

"Black Horse!"

"Black Horse is here."
Her red lover stood before her, a fresh scalp dangling from his girdle.
"What right has the broad-handed warrior to follow the White Rose?" she demanded, her eyes blazing. "Why is Black Horse here?"
"To see that the Rose does not wander so far away that she is unable to return," was the calm reply. "She is to sit in Black Horse's wigwam."

"Then she will be dead! The White Rose hates and despises Black Horse!"

"Big words cannot hurt. The White Rose will come with Black Horse back to Crooked Eye's village. Where are the white braves who seized Black Horse behind?"

But Rose closed her lips and refused to answer. At this the red-skin motioned to his followers, and one of them advanced and grasped Viona at the same time that he again laid his hands upon Rose. Viona's nerves had been wrought to such a pitch that when she felt the Indian's hands rudely grasp her she uttered a shrill scream that went ringing through the passages of the underground cave.

"Hands off that gal, you red dog!"

The Indians wheeled toward the opening to the chamber, and there stood Buck Dingle and five of his desperadoes, including Red Hand, the renegade. Dingle had covered the warrior who grasped Viona, and the hammer of the revolver he held slowly arose by the pressure of his finger on the trigger.

"Hands off that gal!" he repeated. "Drap her, or I'll drap you!"

And covering Black Horse, Red Hand snarled: "You jest drap that 'un, you dirty cuss! She's my property, an' I'm goin' ter hev her."

Black Horse straightened up and faced the outlaws beneath the arch, a strange look on his face.

"Have my white brothers turned against me?" he asked. "What do they want?"

This was spoken in the Sioux tongue, but Dingle understood the language quite well, and he knew that Black Horse understood English to a certain extent, therefore he replied:

"What do we want? We want them gals, an' we're goin' ter have 'em."

"Heap big talk!" grunted the warrior who had laid his hands on Viona, and who did not seem willing to give her up. "Dingle him git in much bad scrape, Crooked Eye know what um do."

"Oh, curse Crooked Eye!" snapped the desperado chief. "I don't care a tinker's hooraw for him. That gal's mine, an' I'm goin' ter have her. My friend, Red Hand, claims t'other 'un. I'm goin' ter see that he gits her."

For several moments the Indians and the white rascals glared into each other's eyes in silence, deepest hatred gleaming from the snaky orbs of the cornered savages. Big Buck quickly grew impatient.

"Come!" broke sharply from his lips. "Did you hear?"

Black Horse spoke a few low, swift words to the warriors who were gathered at his side, causing them to suddenly close in in front of the girls, and advance toward the outlaws with drawn tomahawks.

"Back!" roared Dingle. "Back, you red whelps, or we will wipe ye all out of existence!"

His answer was a wild war-cry as the cornered Indian sprung forward. Then Dingle gave the signal to fire, and a sudden deafening crash of fire-arms seemed to shake the very ground and roll and reverberate in booming echoes through the dark underground passages!

CHAPTER XXIX.

RED HAND PASSES OUT.

CLASPED in each other's arms, the two girls watched the terrific battle between the outlaws and the red-skins, inwardly praying that both parties might be exterminated, for their fate was terrible to contemplate should either be the victors.

Once more the underground chambers resounded with the terrible sounds of a deadly struggle. The whoops of the savages, yells of the outlaws, clash of arms and stunning reports of revolvers made a medley of sounds which might have come from the recesses of Pandemonium. Back and forth in the flaring fire-light swayed the contending men, sometimes locked fast in each other's arms, desperately trying to drive their dripping knives to the most vital spot of their antagonists.

"Wipe 'em all out!" bellowed Dingle, with a furious oath. "For yer lives don't let one escape! Down with 'em!"

It was a short but terrible struggle, and in the end the outlaws were the victors. They had had the advantage from the start and held it. The red-skins had fought savagely, cutting down one-half of Dingle's followers, but were vanquished in the end. The rocky floor of the cavern chamber was dotted with the dead bodies of the fallen Indians and desperadoes. In one corner with his back against the wall sat Red Hand, evidently severely wounded.

Taken all together, it was a scene too horrible for description. Even Dingle, a man of brutal

instincts, seemed sickened by the sight, for he said, huskily:

"We've downed the red imps an' none have escaped to tell of this piece of business. Let's git out of here. Ketch hold of the gals, boys, and take 'em along."

"But how about them as have fallen?" asked one. "Hain't we better burry 'em?"

"No, let 'em be," was the reply. "This cave makes a good tomb, and it hain't likely enny one will ever find 'em here."

As they turned to leave the chamber, Red Hand staggered to his feet, saying huskily:

"You bain't goin' to leave me hyer to die! Hold on, Buck! For the love of God! don't leave me hyer with all these corpses!"

"Well, then come along," snapped Dingle. "What's the matter with ye anyhow?"

"I've got it—got it bad," was the faint reply. "One of them red whelps give me the whole of his knife. The cut don't seem to bleed much, but I reckon I'm hard hit jest the same."

Snatching a brand from the fire, which was left still burning in the natural fireplace, Dingle led the way out of the cave. Every man drew a breath of relief when they found themselves in the narrow cleft along which ran the murmuring stream, and there was not one who would have ventured back alone into the chamber of death for a large amount of money.

Hurling the dying torch into the water, Big Buck still kept the lead as they hastened down the stream, two of the strongest outlaws bearing the girls in their arms, despite Rose's stubborn resistance. When they reached the mouth of the cleft the chief paused a moment to say:

"Now we'll make straight for Lost River Pocket. The rest of the boys will be there. I've got holt of my prize once more, an' I don't mean to let her slip through my fingers this time."

Viona shuddered, for she well knew the import of Big Buck's triumphant words. Twice she had been rescued from the ruffian's hands; she could not hope for such a fortune a third time.

Away through the night went the villainous wretches, forcing the girls along, captives in their midst. Rose was hopeful and did her best to cheer her companion; but Viona's heart felt like a lump of lead in her bosom. The trials and excitements through which she was passing were fast unnerving her and sapping her strength.

For perhaps half an hour the outlaws kept on, and during that time it was with the greatest difficulty that the wounded Red Hand succeeded in remaining with them. He stumbled along behind, panting and breathing in a hoarse, rasping manner that was terrible to hear. At length he stumbled and fell. He did not seem able to get upon his feet again and called feebly to Dingle. The chief desperado stopped and angrily demanded what he wanted.

"I can't go any further," the wounded rascal replied. "I can't git up."

"Oh, that's too thin! Come along if you don't want to be left where ye are."

"I can't, Buck—honest, I can't!"

"Well, then lay there, then!" snarled Dingle, and was about to move on again when the fallen man cried:

"Buck—oh, Buck!"

"What is it now?"

"For God's sake don't desert me now, Buck! Don't leave me hyer to die all alone!" pleaded the wretch, his voice quavering in a plaintive manner.

"Git up and come erlong!" Dingle fired back. "I don't reckon you're hafe so bad hurt as you let on."

"I am, truly—I'm afraid that I'm dyin'. Remember w'at I have done fer you, Buck. I told you whar the cave was; but fer that you wouldn't foun' the gals."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Let two of them make some kind of a stretcher and kerry me to the pocket."

Dingle hesitated, his hand resting on the butt of a revolver. It is probable that at that moment he was tempted to go back and plant a bullet in Red Hand's brain, thus freeing himself of the renegade forever. But finally he spoke to two of his men, and they reluctantly turned back to assist the wounded man. The other two, with Big Buck, pushed on once more.

Morning was near at hand when they reached the end of the tramp. Dingle announced that they were in Lost River Pocket. Before them in the darkness they saw a man rise up, and heard a sharp challenge. Dingle spoke a few words, and they were permitted to pass. A few moments later they came in sight of a smoldering fire, around which were stretched several dark forms. The dim light of the fire showed an old tumble-down hut near by.

When the sleeping outlaws became aware that their chief had returned and brought two girls with him instead of one, they quickly awoke and threw more wood on the fire, so that by its light they might get a fair glimpse of the beautiful captives. The flames shot up, throwing their light out upon the bosom of a dark, still-flowing stream which swept by near at hand, and revealing a broken wall of rock which

rose almost perpendicularly from the water's edge on the other side. Daylight would have shown that the deep but narrow stream flowed on till it disappeared into a dark opening in the side of a mountain. It was said that no man knew where it came forth again, and that explains why the little basin amid the mountains was called Lost River Pocket.

When the outlaws had all taken a look at the two girls, Big Buck conducted them to the cabin and opened the door.

"For the present this is to be your home, gals," he said, as he struck a match and lighted a bit of a tallow candle which was stuck in its own grease on the top of a rickety-looking table. "It hain't such a very bad place neither. There are some blankets in ther corner, and you ought to be able to get some sleep. Don't you worry a bit about bein' disturbed, for there sha'n't no one come here till it's mornin'. Jest make yourselves comfortable. Good-night, my sweet ones."

Then he bowed mockingly and retreated from the old hut, closing and fastening the door behind him.

Neither of the girls slept during the rest of the night, but they lay on the blankets, locked fast in each other's arms, whispering the stories of their lives into attentive ears. Before the gray light of dawn began to creep in at the little four-light window they knew all about each other, and Viona had learned that her strange friend loved her brother, noble Max. From that night the two girls were the firmest and most steadfast friends.

Morning came at last, and with unexpected delicacy, Dingle rapped on the cabin door and waited to be told to come in, before he entered.

"Your fodder will be reddy pritty soon, gals," he announced, setting a bucket of water on the floor. "I've brought you this so that ye can spruce up as I know females always like to do."

Rose asked him what he intended to do with them.

"Do!" he laughed. "Why, I'm goin' ter make little Yellow Hair my wife. As for you, I reckon there are plenty of the men as will be glad to get you now that Red hand has got to go under. He is booked for the other shore sure."

"Beware of the wrath of Crooked Eye when he hears of this!" cried Rose, lifting one hand with a natural dramatic attitude. "You have turned traitor and slain some of his warriors besides making the White Rose of the Sioux a captive. Crooked Eye will visit vengeance upon you!"

"Ho! ho!" sneered the ruffian. "Crooked Eye will never know anything about it, and if he does find out, I shall be beyond his reach. I have got shut of all the reds that was hanging round me, and I am goin' ter skin out of this section putty soon an' git fer New Mexico or Arizona. There's goin' to be a most riotous old racket not fur away before soon, for the troopers are coming and General Custer is leadin' them. This section is gittin' too hot for me."

Shortly after Buck left the cabin one of the men brought the girls their breakfast, and although Viona protested that she could not swallow a mouthful, Rose persuaded her to eat a small amount.

"You must keep your strength," the dark-haired girl insisted. "When the time for escape comes again, you must be strong."

"I fear that time will never come. I have almost lost hope. Twice have I been saved; it is too much to expect such a thing the third time."

But Rose seemed to feel sure that they would get away in some manner.

About an hour after they had eaten, a messenger came to the cabin and said that Red Hand wanted to see Rose. The notorious renegade was dying. The brave girl did not hesitate, but at once followed the man to the wounded ruffian's side. Red Hand was lying on a blanket spread on the grass and looked very white and ghastly.

"I've got ter go," he said, as the girl stopped at his side. "I've bin bleedin' inside. But I couldn't go without makin' a confession. You are not a Sioux. Your father—"

He stopped, gasping painfully, quite unable to proceed. The girl bent eagerly over him, her face almost as white as the dying man's as she cried:

"You hold the secret of my life! Tell me—tell me quick, who and what am I?"

Once more Red Hand struggled to go on, but for several moments he could only utter a low, wheezing sound. At length, he whispered hoarsely:

"Your father and mother were white. I killed your father before you were born—stabbed him in his own house, then fired the buildin'. Your mother—"

Again he broke down. The girl was trembling with eagerness and excitement. She saw that the man was gasping out his last moments, and fearful of not learning her true name, she asked:

"What is my name? Tell me that, then you may tell the rest of the story."

"Your name is—is— Ah!"

With a sudden spasm of agony, he started up

stretching his hands above his head. Then he uttered a groan and fell back heavily.

Rose looked into his ghastly face and knew that death had sealed his lips forever.

CHAPTER XXX.

SETH'S DISCOVERY—BLUE COATS ON HAND.

WITHOUT one backward glance, Silent Seth left the little pocket where it lay the hidden hut beneath the overhanging cliff. His heart was full to overflowing, and he dared not trust himself to look back into the pocket. Within a short half-hour he had apparently grown ten years older. His face seemed lined with wrinkles of care and sorrow which were not there when he descended the path into the pocket, and his form was bent as if under a heavy load. He did not pause till he was far away from his place where he had seen the sleeping woman of the snow-white hair.

Night was at hand. Already the sun was sinking behind the western peaks, and the silent man halted and watched the big ball of molten gold as it slowly disappeared. There was a pitiful look of sadness on his face and his eyes were bedimmed with tears.

"My mission is completed," he murmured. "I have seen her, and the memory will last me to the grave. To the grave! Ah! how soon will my weary heart find rest in the eternal peace of death? I have nothing to live for now."

For a long time after the sun had entirely disappeared he stood there leaning on his rifle and watching the golden glories of the western sky. He seemed to have forgotten his surroundings, and was apparently buried in memories of the past. That some of those memories were pleasant the smiles which occasionally lighted his face testified. Once or twice he murmured the names of his companions of long years ago.

Finally he started and looked around him. The bright colors were dying out of the west, and the shadows were gathering in the dark ravines. Everything around seemed lonely and deserted. He appeared to be the only living creature in all that wild region, but he knew that there were others in the vicinity—he knew that danger and death lurked in the shadows of the grim gulches and lonely fissures.

"I may as well try to find Jim and Harry now," he muttered, as he looked around him. "But which way shall I turn? That is a question which puzzles me, for I seem to be completely lost."

But after a time he decided on a course and struck out. He felt satisfied that he was going in the right direction, but in fact, he was traveling directly away from them.

Night found the silent man alone in a dark ravine. Just before darkness settled he had succeeded in shooting a rabbit, and this he proceeded to dress and cook over a small fire. Montana Jim had caused each of the fortune-seekers to carry a supply of salt on their persons, and so Seth was able to make the rabbit's flesh much more palatable than it would otherwise have been. When he had eaten his supper, he crept into a dark niche—first putting out his fire—and soon fell asleep.

All through the night Seth slept soundly and undisturbed. At the first hint of morning he was astir and once more resumed the search for his friends. He had saved enough of the rabbit's meat to make a very fair breakfast upon, and a cold drink from a bubbling spring made him feel like a new man.

"I shall be plied with questions when I find them," he muttered. "They will want some kind of an explanation, but will have to be content with what I see fit to tell them."

At an early hour he found himself looking down into a small pocket through which flowed a swift but narrow stream that vanished into a huge dark hole in the side of the mountain. The pocket was surrounded on all sides by precipitous walls, and the only practicable way of entering it seemed to be through a narrow pass almost directly opposite where the silent man stood. With great surprise, Seth observed that there was a band of men gathered around a fire in the pocket. An old cabin, which seemed on the point of falling to pieces, stood within three rods of the dark stream.

"I wonder who they can be," thought Seth, as he sought a place of concealment and watched the party below. "They are white men, probably outlaws. I do not see a red-skin among them. Probably they are the gang of desperadoes who are said to have a hiding-place amid these wilds."

He could see that some of the men near the fire were cooking meat—evidently venison. They were all rough-looking fellows, bearded and armed to the teeth. Seth mentally decided that it would be as much as an honest man's life was worth to fall in with the gang. There was one big fellow who strutted around and gave off orders. This the watching man above rightly decided was the leader, for it was Big Buck himself.

Not far from the fire a man lay stretched on a blanket, and Seth rightly conjectured that he was wounded. It was Red Hand.

While the silent man lay there watching, he saw some of the food carried to the cabin.

He still lay in his place of concealment when Rose was summoned to the dying renegade's side. A low exclamation of surprise broke from his lips when he saw the dark-haired girl leave the cabin.

"A girl!" he muttered. "She has a graceful figure, but is dressed more like a young Indian squaw than anything else. I wonder who she is and if she is a prisoner?"

He watched the girl as she knelt beside the wounded wretch on the blanket, but of course he was so far away that he could not hear a word that either of them spoke. He saw Red Hand when he started up with outstretched hands and then fell back heavily, and he knew that another poor wretch had reached the end of this mortal life, and his spirit had gone before the Judgment Bar.

When she saw that the man was really dead, the dark-haired girl arose to her feet and stood a moment gazing down at the motionless form on the blanket. Then she turned and walked slowly and sadly away. The eyes of the unseen watcher followed her.

When the girl reached the door of the old cabin Seth saw another maiden, whose hair gleamed like golden threads in the morning sunlight, come out and meet her. With their arms around each other the two went slowly into the cabin.

To say that the watcher far above was surprised by what he had seen would be expressing it very mildly indeed. He had at once decided that one of the girls, at least, was a captive, and as they seemed very friendly, it was quite probable that they were both captives. Was there no way that he could learn the truth?

Concealed by the bushes, he lay for more than an hour after the girls had disappeared into the cabin, hoping that they would come out where he could see them again. At last, his vigil was rewarded, for both of the maidens came out and sat down upon the grass near the cabin where the sunlight fell fairly upon them. But even then the silent man could not get a fair view of their faces.

"If I was only a little lower!" he muttered.

Almost directly below he could see the deep, swift stream sweeping along till it disappeared into the dark hole of the mountain-side. The rocky wall was quite steep, but a short distance down he saw a boulder which he knew would afford excellent concealment from the ruffians in the pocket. To reach it he would have to leave his cover and would be in danger of being seen by the men in the pocket, but he resolved to make the venture. Choosing a time that he thought the most favorable, he glided swiftly down the steep slope.

But his venture was fated to prove disastrous, for the skulking figure amid the rocks was seen by one of the outlaws, and a rifle-shot rang through the pocket. The silent man dropped his rifle, threw up his hands and sprang outward from the rocks to whirl over twice while in the air and strike the water feet first, instantly disappearing. The outlaw who fired the shot ran forward and saw the water swiftly bearing the body toward the opening in the side of the mountain. He made an effort to secure it, but was unsuccessful, and the pitiless water swept the inanimate form into the black vault where it gurgled and moaned as it dashed onward through the Erebus-like darkness on its downward journey to unknown regions of eternal night.

The two girls had seen the strange man come whirling downward and strike in the deep, swift stream. As the rifle rang out they sprang to their feet with cries of alarm.

"Oh, who was it, rose?" faltered Viona, when the water had swept the body of the unfortunate man into the yawning hole in the mountain-side.

"I do not know," was the reply. "It was not the brave pale-face you call your brother, that I know. Perhaps—perhaps it was the—the other."

"Oh, no, no!" Viona exclaimed. "It was not Victor I am sure! I saw the man as he fell, and I am certain that it was not Victor."

"It was no friend of these cowards, for they have murdered him. The body will never be seen again, for no man knows where Lost River comes forth to the light of day."

Deeply impressed by the fate of the unknown man, the girls withdrew into the cabin, where they might be alone.

Slowly the day dragged away. At noon Dingle brought them some food, and inquired after their health, with mock solicitude. They were relieved when the wretch left them alone once more, but before he did so, he informed them that on the following day his men and himself would start for the South, and that they had better prepare themselves for a long journey—just how long he could not tell.

The twilight shadows were beginning to gather when the girls were startled by a sudden rattle of firearms and a wild cheer, which was followed by what sounded like yells of consternation and dismay. Then came a wild medley of sounds, which told that a desperate battle was taking place within the pocket.

For several moments the two girls were chained with amazement and terror, then Rose

sprung forward and threw open the cabin door. They looked out upon a scene of wild confusion. The pocket was filled with the fighting horde—or seemed to be. All around were struggling, swaying men who looked like grim demons in the dying light of day. The flash of pistols punctured the twilight gloom, and made the wild scene appear still more terrible by their occasional fitful glare. Yells, oaths, cries of pain and the rattle of firearms fell heavily upon the air. It was a scene to hold the spectator fascinated, spellbound with a strange feeling of horror.

A part of the fighting men were mounted, and the girls saw that they wore blue coats, and their faces were covered by masks.

Captain Nameless and his followers had attacked Dingle and his desperadoes once more, and this time they had the advantage of a complete surprise, for the sentinel in the pass had been captured without any noise, so that the outlaws were unaware of the approach of the Blue Coats.

For a few moments Rose watched the wild scene, then she turned to her companion, saying hurriedly:

"Come! now is the time for us to make our escape. We can creep away in the shadows while the fight is in progress."

Viona did not hesitate, and, hand in hand, the maidens slipped from the old cabin and fled away through the twilight gloom.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FORTUNE-HUNTERS FIND FRIENDS.

THERE was no doubt about it, Captain Nameless had broken his pledge. When Montana Jim and his companions fully realized this they were decidedly angry, and the imprecations they heaped upon the Blue Coat chief were startling to hear. Montana Jim was the angriest one of the party, and Handy Harry the coolest. The old prospector growled and swore, while the sport smiled and advised him to hold his temper.

"Hold my temper!" snapped Jim. "How am I goin' ter hold my temper w'en I think how ther blasted blue-coated rascal lied to us an' deceived us?"

"Refrain from thinking of it, James; control yourself, old man—simmer down." But that only seemed to make the veteran the wilder, for he fairly danced in his rage and actually shook his knotted fists in the laughing sport's face.

"Grin ef ye want ter!" he raved—"grin like a blasted idiot! You know ez well ez I do thet thet measly whelp o' ther blue coat made a durned mess o' fools o' us all. Grin erway! You jest wait tell I git my grip onter Cap'n Nameless—you jest wait!"

"James," said the quiet sport, "do you know what you make me think of? Well, you look just like that big outlaw who whooped and hopped round when the Blue Coats carried off the girl. I assure you, old man, you cut fully as ridiculous a figure at this moment. You have lost every bit of your dignity."

This seemed to be a cooler, for the old miner stopped dancing and raving and stood very still for several moments looking away into the dusky gloom of descending night. Finally, he broke into a short laugh, and said:

"Waal, then I must 'a' looked well, I sw'ar!"

Then he sat down with the others and calmly discussed the situation. Little Rocks was worried at the continued absence of the Indian Hawk Eye.

"I don't understan' w'y he hain't cum round afore this," said the scout. "He must 'a' run the Blue Coats to their hoels all right fer we hev seen Cap'n Nameless erg'in. Unless he hes got inter trouble, he sh'ud 'a' bin hyer."

"Perhaps he could not find us," Harry ventured.

Rocks shook his head. "There is no trouble about thet. Hawk Eye is like a bloodhound on the trail."

"Waal," said Jim, "I am fer gittin' away frum hyer ter onc't. It is plain thet Cap'n Nameless don't mean ter keep his word, but he may take er noshun ter swoop down onter us with his confounded Blue Coats and wipe us all out."

Handy Harry declared that he did not fear anything of the kind, but both of the others were for moving, and he was forced to consent. The scout led the way through the fast gathering darkness, and, with the young deer swung on a short pole between them, Jim and Harry followed.

They finally reached a very narrow and secluded ravine, and there they halted for the night. While Rocks prepared the meat for cooking, Jim and the sport gathered wood and built a fire. Even the scout was forced to confess that the fire made the place look cheery and pleasant, but he added that it might be the means of getting them all scalped.

The venison was cooked over the hot coals and gave out an odor that made the men feel as ravenous as starving beasts. And when they came to eat it, the card-sharp declared that never before had he tasted anything so good.

When they had satisfied their hunger, they

all lay back in the gleam of the firelight, seeming to forget their surroundings and danger as they gazed into the ruddy mass of coals and flame. For a long time they lay thus, and the expressions on their faces seemed to indicate that their thoughts were far away. Perhaps they were recalling some pleasant memory of boyhood days—that vanished time that now seemed so very far away that it scarce appeared more than a faded, happy dream.

Finally Rocks aroused himself and looked at his companions. Montana Jim's eyes were fixed straight upon the fire and there was a smile on his grim face that completely changed its appearance and made the old man look as happy as a child. But the scout gave a start of surprise when his gaze fell upon Handy Harry's face, for he saw that big tears were trickling across his face, and his keen eyes were blinded by the unbidden moisture. It was a revelation, for Rocks had set the sport down as a reckless, dare-devil sort of fellow, possessed of little conscience or feeling. Involuntarily, the little man in buckskin caught himself wondering if some unknown cause had not driven Harry to the wild life that he had been leading.

The scout dreaded to break the spell which seemed to have fallen upon his companions, and he was not obliged to do so, for suddenly Montana Jim laughed outright. But when his companions turned to him with looks of surprise, his laugh had ended with a shortness that was startling, and the expression of gravity on his face was almost alarming compared with the recent burst of mirth.

"W'at is it, pard?" asked Rocks. "W'at wuz ye laffin' at?"

"Did I laff?" asked the prospector, in simulated surprise. "Waal, I'd like ter know w'at I wuz laffin' at merself, fer I wuz thinkin' o' ther time my Aunt Polly died, an' I wuz denied ther excoosiatin' pleasure o' attendin' the funeral 'cause I wuz sick in bed with ther whoopin' measles, or scarlet rash, or *sumthin'*. Dunno w'at in thunder I laffed fer, an' if you'll tell me I'll make it w'ith yer trouble."

By this time Handy Harry had wiped all traces of tears from his face, and when he sat up he discussed the advisability of letting the fire burn out or extinguishing it at once. They all felt quite secure in their sheltered position, for it did not seem possible that their fire would be discovered unless some one looked down into the ravine from almost directly above, so they finally decided to let it burn.

Then Montana Jim lighted his pipe, and Rocks and the sport followed his example. For some time they smoked and discussed the situation. Finally, Rocks volunteered to act as guard the first part of the night, and the others lay down and fell asleep. Then they received the benefit of the fire, for their blankets had gone with their horses and they had nothing but their clothes to protect them from the chill night air.

Despite the fact that a number of wolves were attracted to that vicinity, probably scenting the blood of the deer that the scout had slain, the night passed quietly. With the break of day the three were astir. There was plenty of the venison left, and they enjoyed a hearty breakfast, after which they consulted on the best course to pursue. Finally, they started out, with Rocks leading again.

The sun was at least two hours high when they discovered three persons advancing toward them, and they instantly sunk down in the nearest place of concealment. The three men came steadily on, and as they advanced the ones in concealment saw that two of them were quite young while the third was an old man. They were, in fact, Max Burke, his father and Victor Leclair.

"They don't look like lan' pirates," whispered old Jim.

"Can't allus tell by looks," Rocks retorted.

"Right you are, oh, friend of the buckskin attire," nodded Handy Harry, as he coolly inspected his revolvers. "They are about as likely to be imps as angels."

"They are bound to diskiver us," whispered the scout. "Putt up 'em tools an' use yer rifle if ye hev ter. We must git ther drap, an' then fine out be they frien's or foes. Take a peep at 'em over yer Winchester, an' I will call a halt in ther persessbun."

When everything was ready the three arose with the "drop," and the little scout called out:

"Say, hole up there jest a dite, will ye. What for is your rush?"

The little party halted in surprise and consternation. Max was the first to regain his composure.

"Hello!" he said. "Who in sin's name are you?"

"Now that is jest ther question we wuz thinkin' o' axin' you, an' ez we hev ther drop, p'r'aps you will consent ter answer fu'st."

It did not take them long to discover that they were friends, or should be; and they were soon relating their adventures to each other and explaining how they came to be there in the wilds of the Big Horn Mountains. When Jim told of the rescue of a beautiful girl from the outlaws and red-skins by the Blue Coats, Dave Burke became greatly excited.

"That wuz her!" he cried—"that wuz Vio! We hev got ter find thet Captain Nameless."

And the others fully agreed with him. Then and there they formed a compact to stand by each other till they were safely out of the dangers which beset them or were dead. They clasped each other's hands, and felt that their chances of success were increased by the union of forces.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CAVE OF DEATH—FOUND!

THE search for Captain Nameless finally led the party into a locality that seemed familiar to Max and Victor. They felt sure that they had been there before, and, after a time, Max cried:

"We are near the cave which we could not find last night! Follow me. I think I can go directly to it."

He was right, for they soon reached the little stream and found themselves passing at single file along the narrow cleft. At the mouth of the cave they halted, for they did not like to enter the dark place without some kind of a light to guide their unfamiliar footsteps. Victor espied the half burned brand which Buck Dingle had dropped hours before. It was lying in a niche amid the rocks with only one end touching the water. The young lawyer picked it up, and soon they had a feebly burning torch to light the way.

"Come on," he said, as he left the twilight gloom of the cleft for the midnight blackness of the cave.

The others followed the small torch, which seemed scarcely to give out any light at all, and glowed like a dull red star in the Stygian darkness. Their footsteps on the stones echoed hollowly along the passage and the sound gave them a "creepy" sensation. The dismal place seemed a fitting abode for evil spirits. Not one of them spoke, and involuntarily their hands fell upon their revolvers or gripped their rifles still harder.

Onward they went till they reached the opening of the chamber in which was the natural fire-place; but the fire was out and the place seemed dark and deserted. Just as Victor was about to step under the arch a cavern bat dashed itself against his torch, which was knocked from his hand and extinguished, leaving them in utter darkness. He stooped and attempted to find the torch upon the floor, but his groping hands failed to touch it. The others stood silently in the darkness, a sudden feeling of horror having fallen upon them.

"I cannot find it."

It was Victor's voice, but the sound was so hollow and ghostly that they all started and caught their breath.

The young lawyer arose to his feet and started to move forward toward the natural fire-place, beside which he knew that there was a pile of wood, a pitchy knot of which might serve as a torch. He did not go far before his foot slipped and then struck against something that caused him to halt with a cold chill creeping over him. Of a sudden he fancied that there was a smell of blood in the close dark place, and with trembling fingers, he secured a match and lighted it, standing in his tracks.

Slowly the tiny blaze grew larger till, of a sudden, it flared up and lighted the whole chamber for one brief second. Then it fell from his fingers and a cry of horror broke from his lips.

He had seen the motionless forms which lay all around him on the rocky floor of the cavern of death!

Max heard Victor's cry and started forward, exclaiming:

"Victor! what is it?"

But for several moments the young lawyer was unable to reply, for his tongue seemed frozen with horror. His first impulse was to turn and dash out of the terrible place, but he was far from a coward, and with an effort he subdued his unreasoning terror in a measure. As soon as he had gained control of his tongue, he called out:

"Stay where you are, Max. I will have a light in here in a few moments."

Then he struck another match, and by its faint light succeeded in crossing the chamber to the place where the natural fireplace was. Into that he quickly piled some wood, and soon had a good blaze started.

As the flames sprang up he stepped away and allowed the light to fall upon a ghastly, terrible scene. His companions were standing in the arch, and a simultaneous cry of horror broke from their lips as they saw the rigid forms which were strewn upon the chamber floor. Higher and higher rose the flaring flames in the fireplace, flinging their unsteady lights over the motionless figures and ghastly countenances of the dead, who lay as they had fallen in the last moments of their expiring agony, their bodies twisted into a hundred nameless shapes and their faces distorted in a horrible manner. It was a sight to freeze the blood of the bravest.

"My God!"

The exclamation broke from the lips of one of the men in the natural archway, then all was still again. The fire rose higher and higher, and the dancing light banished some of the dismal shadows; but there was a certain horror about the place which the full light of day

would not have dispelled. It was plain to the six men who gazed upon the frightful scene that a desperate and bloody battle had taken place in that very cave.

"What does it mean?"

Max asked the question as he slowly advanced into the chamber, followed by the others. And Victor replied:

"Who can tell?"

"It means thet thar hes bin one high ole scrimmage hyer," nodded Little Rocks.

"Waal, now you are shoutin'!" agreed Montana Jim.

As for the sport, he gazed around him with a look of sorrow.

"Ye gods, what nasty luck!" he muttered. "Why couldn't we have got round in time to take a hand in the game? As it is, we are too late for the fun, for death has raked the pot. Tracy Harrison, you are left again!" and he wiped away a few imaginary tears.

The old rancher said not a word.

After a few moments they began to carefully inspect the dead.

"These whites hev ther look o' measly rascals," observed the veteran prospector. "I'll be hung ef they look like hones' men!"

The others agreed with him, and Rocks thought that they might have been outlaws.

"But, ef they wuz, w'at fer wuz they fightin'?"

That was a question that no one seemed able to answer. At the same time, all seemed to think that the reds and their white friends had fallen out about something, and then had fallen in and slaughtered each other.

"If they w'd only keep it up tell every red-skin an' white varmint wuz extarminated it 'ud be a blessin' ter ther kentry," was old Jim's opinion; and Handy Harry said solemnly:

"Yea, verily!"

Suddenly the scout started forward with a cry of amazement and horror, seizing a dusky form in his arms and lifting it so that the firelight fell upon the rigid face.

It was Hawk Eye!

"Pards," said Little Rocks, solemnly, gazing down into the face of the dead Crow, "ther whitest Injun thet ever breathed hes gone to ther happy huntin'-grounds. Hawk Eye is dead!"

Tenderly they lifted the blood-stained form of the friendly Crow who had made such a gallant fight for his life, and bore it close to the fire. The dead savage still held his bloody knife gripped tight in his left hand. After several moments of silence, Rocks said:

"It is strange how *he* should come to be mixed in this scrape, for he was not the friend of either outlaw or Sioux. I don't jest understan' thet part of it."

And no one could explain it.

They decided to bury him in the cave if they could find a suitable place, and, taking a pitch knot from the fire, Jim went to look for the spot. He soon returned and announced that he had found one. Then, while two of them carried flaring torches, the others lifted the dead Crow and bore him from the chamber, the torch-bearers also carrying some knives and tomahawks with which to dig the grave.

In a lonely part of the underground vault they lowered the body gently and set about the task of excavating a grave. The earth at that particular spot was soft and light, which made the work easier than had been anticipated. While the others were at work, Rocks went back to the chamber of death and brought a blanket in which he wrapped the body of his dead friend. Then, when everything was ready, he was lowered into his last resting-place, his knife still gripped tight by his cold and rigid fingers. For a moment there was silence as they stood around the open grave, their heads uncovered, then Little Rocks spoke. No one would suspected that he was the possessor of the least eloquence, but those who listened to his eulogy of the dead warrior soon learned that in his homely way he could be eloquent indeed. At times his voice rung grandly through the vaulted chamber, then it would sink to a low sad tone that was filled with a strange, quaint pathos quite indescribable. The blood of the listeners quickened when he described the noble nature of the dead brave and their eyes filled with tears when he spoke of his untimely death and his last lonely resting-place—a grave upon which the sunlight would never fall and over which the wild birds would never sing—a grave in a region of eternal darkness.

When Rocks had finished, Dave Burke made a short prayer, and then the body was forever covered from the sight of man. After that sad duty was completed they returned to the chamber where the fire still burned brightly in the natural fire-place.

In the outer passage Harry had noticed a deep, narrow pit, and it was decided to drop the bodies into that. That was a task which took considerable time, and they ended by cutting away an overhanging shelf of earth and stone and allowing that to fall into the pit, completely and effectually covering the bodies.

After this was done they again returned to the chamber and discussed the situation. They all wished to leave the place as soon as possible,

a thing which was decided upon as they had satisfied their hunger with some of the dried meat which Max and Victor knew where to find.

The search for Captain Nameless was resumed when they left the cavern, but it proved a fruitless task. That night, weary and discouraged, they camped far from the cave of death. A small fire was built, for they were in a sheltered spot; but very few words were exchanged as they sat around it and gazed gloomily into the dancing flames. Finally, a guard was stationed and the others lay down to sleep.

Perhaps two or three hours had passed when they were suddenly aroused by hearing a wild laugh that echoed weirdly amid the rocks and pines. Every man started up, grasping a weapon, and sat listening for the strange sound to be repeated. For a long time all was still, and then once more that wild laugh came out of the darkness, for the moon had not risen.

"What is it?" asked one, in an awed whisper. "I hev heerd it afore," asserted Montana Jim.

"Right you are, James," agreed Handy Harry. "It is the hair-lifting and blood cooling laugh of the ancient dame who calls herself the White-haired Witch."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the strange creature concealed by the darkness. "Why do you sleep when death stalks abroad in the darkness of the gulches?"

"My dear madam," said the sport, speaking so softly that his companions could barely distinguish his words. "We have a habit of sleeping when are tired and letting Death stalk as long as he keeps away from us. If the old fellow wants to stalk, let him stalk."

Once more the woman's voice rung out shrilly:

"I know for whom ye seek—I know, I know! Her eyes are blue and she has golden hair. Go to the bad men of the mountains, for she is in their power. Awake, awake! Why do ye sleep when death is abroad—death and despair! Woe, woe, woe!"

The last wailing cry seemed to recede further and further away till the voice died out in the distance. Little Rocks started to his feet.

"Pards," he sibilated, "whoever thet is, she knows suthin' 'bout ther gal. I'm goin' ter foller her ef I kin. You stay rite hyer tell I cum back."

And before they could say a word, he had vanished in the darkness. Nothing more was heard from the wild woman, therefore they concluded that she had departed. Would the scout be able to follow her through the night?

Slowly the hours wore away as they lay discussing the situation in low whispers, waiting for their friend's return. The moon came out and crept up into the sky; the hours dragged slowly by. Suddenly Little Rocks stood before them.

"Come on every mother's son o' ye!" he cried in tones of excitement and triumph. "I hev foun' both gals! Foller me!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FOUND BY A FRIEND—CAPTAIN NAMELESS ENTERS.

HAND and hand the girls, Rose and Viona, fled from the pocket where the terrible battle between the Blue Coats and the outlaws was taking place. Fortune favored them, for they were not seen by any of the contending men, and soon the twilight gloom screened them from view. As they ran onward, panting and breathless, expecting to hear pursuing feet behind them at any moment, the sounds of the conflict grew fainter and fainter. Finally from sheer exhaustion they were compelled to slacken their speed, but they still pressed forward, for they were in the narrow pass that led to the pocket and they knew that they could not conceal themselves from any body of men that might pass along. As they still sped forward darkness came down like a pall over the mountains.

Finally Rose led the way from the narrow pass and they sat down to rest.

"Free—free once more!" sobbed Viona, as she lay on the ground with her head in the lap of her faithful companion. "Heavenly Father, I thank thee! It is better to perish in the darkness by savage animals than to meet the fate that would have been ours in the hands of those wretches who are worse than animals."

"My beautiful sister speaks truly. But we have escaped, and we will hope that Fortune will guide us to the friends who are probably searching for us at this time."

"Oh! you are good and true and brave, Rose of the mountain wilds. But for you—but for your cheering words and support I might have broken down ere this. I will never forget it. I do not wonder that brother Max fell in love with you. I should have wondered if he had not. Ah, Rose, he is a noble fellow—he is good, he is manly! He will make you happy. It seems so nice that we are going to be sisters, really, truly sisters!"

For several moments the strange girl of the mountains did not speak. Finally she faltered:

"Yes, I know he is noble and manly. I know he is brave and strong, for I saw him meet ten of Crooked Eye's warriors, and he would have

conquered them all but for the cowardly act of the bad white man, Red Hand. I loved him then as he stood there in the midst of the many foes who surrounded him and swept them down as if they were children. I shall always love him, but—but I am nothing but a wild girl of the wilderness. I know the language of the ones who are truly my people, but that is all I know. I am so—so—"

"There, there!" interrupted the maiden of the yellow hair. "You already speak the white man's language perfectly, thanks to the kind woman who you say was your companion for so many years. It will not take you long to learn anything that you may apply your mind to, for I will become your teacher. I know that you will make a splendid pupil, and it will be just jolly fun."

Forgetting her position for a moment, she actually laughed a little, and lifted herself up so that she could hug her friend. Rose seemed to catch her spirit, for she too was forced to laugh. It was truly a pretty picture that Viona had drawn, but the forest beauty seemed still in doubt. She seemed to fear that when they were safely out of the mountains, and Max discovered how little she really knew, he would sicken of her.

"I tell you brother Max is not that kind of a fellow," protested Viona. "He is true blue all the way through. He is not the kind that falls in love easily and falls out still more easily. You have told me the talk he made to you, and I feel certain that he was in earnest. If he was not he ought to be skinned! Oh! you may depend on it, if we ever get out of these horrid mountains there are bright days in store for us."

"He must be very good, truly, to have such a sister. But I will tell you one thing: Although your hearts must be much alike, you do not look alike in the least. I should never dream that you were his sister."

"No, we do not look alike; but then, that is just nothing. We think just as much of each other. I wonder where Max is now—and Victor," softly. "Dear Victor! He has ventured much to come here amid these wild mountains to try to save me. He is all gold, good and true."

After they were rested the girls arose and went onward through the darkness once more. They dared not remain in that vicinity longer, for they still feared pursuit. They had passed far beyond the sound of battle, but it was probable that the battle was ended long before. They knew not which way to turn in the darkness, but trusted to Providence to guide them away, away. In the morning Rose might be able to tell where they were.

It was more than two hours later when they once more sat down to rest. They talked for some time in low tones, and Rose insisted in holding Viona's head in her lap. In that position the yellow-haired maiden finally fell asleep.

When she awoke her faithful friend was still holding her head as when she had fallen asleep. The moon had arisen and was lighting the cathedral-like peaks, the mimic castles and massive fortresses carved from the eternal rock. For a few moments she forgot where she was and lay gazing in enraptured wonder at what appeared to be a real castle far, far up in the white moonlight near the top of a mountain. Then Rose discovered that her companion was awake and spoke. It broke the waking spell and recalled the truth of her situation.

Once more the girls fell to talking in low tones, Viona urging her friend to get some sleep while she remained awake. This Rose seemed to fear to do. Suddenly the dark-haired girl places her hand over the other's mouth and made a gesture for silence.

The moon was high enough so that she lighted a part of the ravine in which they were, but the shadows quite concealed them. Slowly a strange figure came walking out into the moonlight—the figure of a woman with long snow-white hair. She halted not far away, and the girls plainly heard her say:

"The moon is up, but still death lurks in the dark shadows. In the shadows six men are sleeping. Let them beware lest the grim monster finds them and they fail to discover the fair-haired maiden for whom they are searching. I have warned them; let them heed."

"I thought I heard voices here a moment ago—low voices—sweet voices! Could it have been the wind? No, for the wind is sleeping. Could it have been the voices of my brain? No, for they always speak in harsh, jarring tones. Could it have been spirit? It may."

"But, why am I wandering here to-night when I should be asleep and at rest? Ha! ha! Rest! The word is a mockery! There is no rest for me never again. Yes—perhaps there is rest in the grave."

Rose bent and whispered in Viona's ear: "It is the White-haired Witch. Be not afraid, for she will not harm us if she finds us."

But Viona had recognized the woman as the strange person who had befriended her once before, so she whispered back:

"I know her. Let's speak to her."

But Rose seemed to hesitate, for her mind was filled with the Indian superstition that there was something more than human about the old wo-

man of the white hair. However, when Viona saw the woman moving away, she sprung up and called to her.

"Who calls?" demanded the strange woman, as she paused. "Who calls? Let them come forth."

A moment later the two girls emerged into the moonlight side by side. When she saw them, the woman uttered an exclamation of surprise and advanced toward them.

"It is the yellow-haired one for whom they are searching!" she exclaimed. "The White Rose is with her. Good! Something led me here to-night. The girls shall go with me to the hidden hut; then I will bring her friends."

After a few moments' talk, the girls followed their new-found friend away through the moonlight and shadows. It was a long tramp, for she led them straight to the secluded pocket. As they went along, she told Viona that her friends were safe and still searching for her. She promised when they had reached the pocket and rested to bring the little party to the place.

"There are six of them now," she said. "They have found friends, the ones who are searching for the fortune that they will never find. Many and many a white man has lost his life searching for the Lost Placer. The golden pool does not exist."

After a time they reached the pocket. The woman cautioned them to beware of falling, and slowly they descended the dangerous path. They reached the bottom in safety, and she led them toward the cabin beneath the cliff. They passed from the moonlight into the shadow and entered the hidden hut. The strange woman struck a light and closed the door.

"There, you are safe here," she said. "You shall have food and can rest. In the morning your friends shall be with you."

But Viona remembered that Buck Dingle had found her there once before, and she feared that he might appear again. She told the woman of her dread, and the strange dweller in the hidden hut passed her hand over her forehead and looked puzzled.

"I seem to remember it," she said; "but it is vague—very vague. I forget some things very easily, and others I do not seem able to forget at all. I try hard to banish them from my mind, but I always fail, I always fail."

She gave the girls something to eat, and they made a hearty meal, for their fortune in escaping from their brutal captors seemed to have given them an appetite. Then, too, the strange woman had told them that their friends were safe and still searching for them. Hope beamed like a morning star.

But suddenly the cabin door swung open without the least warning, and a blue-coated figure stepped into the room. A single look told Viona who the intruder was.

Captain Nameless!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SCENE AT THE HIDDEN HUT.

QUITE coolly the masked man of mystery stepped into the hut, bowing low to the girls, although his gloved hands made no move toward the wide-brimmed sombrero, from beneath which a mass of dark hair fell upon his shoulders. Then his eyes fell upon the white-haired woman and seemed to rest there.

The woman of the hidden hut had been as much startled by the unlooked-for appearance of the blue-coated chief as were the girls, and when the strange man turned his gleaming eyes upon her, she fell back with a gasp, lifting her hands before her face, as if to shut out some dreaded vision. For a moment it seemed that she would fall to the floor with sudden weakness, but she did not.

Dead silence reigned in the cabin. The light from the rock fire-place fell upon a singular tableau. With folded arms, the chief of the mountain masks stood in his tracks just within the door, his hidden face turned toward the cowering woman of the snow-white hair and his midnight eyes gleaming with a terrible light as they almost seemed to shine through the twin holes in the blue mask.

The girls could not speak, for they seemed to be frozen with a strange fascination that was not unmingled with horror. There was something about the singular scene that held them chained by a magic spell. The intruder had not made one menacing move, yet it seemed to the girls that he was about to spring upon the woman of the white hair.

For some time the singular scene lasted. Suddenly the woman lowered her hands and cried:

"Who in heaven's name are you?"

The strange man bowed again, as he replied:

"I am Captain Nameless, chief of the Blue Coats, at your service, madam."

His voice was calm, smooth and pleasant to the ear, but it seemed to startle the woman in a singular manner, for she sprung forward a step with one hand outstretched, as she hoarsely gasped:

"That voice! Heavenly Father! am I dreaming?"

"I scarcely think so, madam, of the snowy hair," bowed the man of mystery. "I am quite

sure that I am not dreaming myself, therefore I am inclined to believe you wide-awake like myself. True, it is the midnight hour and the time for dreams, but thus far this night I have not closed my eyes in slumber; for that reason I am sure that this is no hallucination of dream-land."

The woman still stood like one in a horrible trance, her eyes fixed upon the Blue Coat chief in a stare that was unpleasant to see. Indeed, she did not seem able to take her eyes from that tall, graceful figure. Once more a silence fell upon the inmates of the hut beneath the cliff. The girls drew closer to each other and with dilated eyes watched the man and woman. The fire leaped and flared in a strange manner, causing a legion of phantom-like shadows to flit around the room.

Captain Nameless was the first to break the silence.

"I am afraid I am not welcome," he said, a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

This seemed to arouse the woman, for once more she cried:

"Who are you?"

"I believe I mentioned my present title."

"Yes, yes; but your true name—what is it?"

The man stared straight at her for several seconds, then he replied, very slowly:

"My true name—woman, I have none! I am nameless, homeless—an outcast, a miserable wretch who has nothing to live for in this world of treachery and sin. I have cast aside forever the name of my boyhood and my youth, and to the world I am as one dead. My history has been a strange one, and the treachery of a beautiful woman made me what I am. No, I will not tell you who I was in the bitter, unforgotten past. Do not ask me."

There was a sadness about his aspect and in his voice that was touching in the extreme. He stood before them a wronged man—one who had tried to forget the past but had failed. A man who had cast aside his true name and assumed a strange title. A man who had buried himself in the heart of the mountain wilds that he might escape from the rush and whirl of the great world and be alone with his sorrowful memories amid the mighty solitudes. Truly he was a man of mystery.

For a moment his words seemed to silence the woman, but she did not take her eyes from the blue mask. She seemed to be trying to penetrate it and see the features beyond; but it was made to conceal every outline of the face, and from the bottom depended a strip of thin blue cloth that quite hid the man's chin and throat.

"You have the voice of one who is dead," declared the woman, after a time. "Remove that mask and let me look upon your face."

But he shook his head.

"Oh, no! I could not think of such a thing. Since assuming the title of Captain Nameless no man or woman has seen me remove my mask. I cannot grant your request, madam."

"Then I will tear it away!"

Quick as thought, the woman sprang forward to accomplish her design; but swift as were her movements, Captain Nameless was not taken unawares. Out darted his gloved hands and caught both her wrists, then he held her as easily as if she were a child.

"Oh, no! I wouldn't do that!" he cried, a wild light flashing from his eyes. "Have a care! do not arouse me to anger, for I am unable to control my acts then. If you knew what a demon you might arouse, you would shudder with horror. When I am seized by one of my spells I am to be shunned as you would shun a mad dog. Beware!"

Straight into her eyes he glared, causing her to draw back with a shuddering moan. The sight of her fear seemed to cause the masked man great delight, for he drew her toward him, hoarsely sibilating:

"You know me, false-hearted one! There is no need of removing this mask for you to know me. And I—I know you well, Lyla Weston!"

Then of a sudden he released her wrists, and she staggered back as if struck a heavy blow in the face, clutching wildly at the air. When she recovered in a measure, Captain Nameless was once more standing with folded arms. She glared at him as if he were one risen from the dead.

"It cannot be true!" she faintly gasped. "My brain is whirling round and round. This is a delusion and a mockery. Oh, merciful Father! what can it mean?"

The girls still clung close together, wildly watching the strange scene which they could not understand.

Suddenly Captain Nameless unfolded his arms and threw back his head with a peculiar toss, as if throwing off some unwelcome emotion. At the same moment the woman advanced a step, speaking with an effort to be calm:

"I refuse to know you, you black phantom from the past. You would have me believe that you are dead, but you cannot deceive me. Why are you here? What do you want?"

"I did not come here to be questioned, but to ask questions," declared the man of mystery, coldly. "You know that I am aware of your past life, false woman of the snow-white hair, and let me tell you that it will be useless to

attempt to deceive me with lies. *I will have the truth!* Do you understand?"

She did not reply, but stood looking mutely at him.

"Where is Rupert Weston's child?"

As he asked the question, he leaned forward, and once more fixed his piercing eyes upon her face. She uttered a low cry and lifted her hands to her heart, but did not seem able to reply for several moments. Finally she said:

"I do not know."

"You do not know!" repeated the man of the blue coat and mask, with infinite scorn. "You do not know what has become of your own flesh and blood! Woman, is the child dead?"

"I cannot tell! I cannot tell!"

"And why? Explain your words."

"I know not what became of her, for he disposed of her. He told me that she was in the hands of those who would care for her better than we could do."

"He! Whom do you mean? Your guilty lover, of course! The man who murdered your husband—the man with whom you fled to unknown parts. Where is the dastardly wretch now? Does he still live?"

"He was not my lover!" cried the woman, wildly. "It was all a mistake—a horrible mistake!"

A sneering laugh came from beneath the blue mask.

"Woman, you lie! Your tongue to-day is as false as when years ago you whispered loving words in the ears of the poor, trusting fool, Rupert Weston. Your heart was black with deceit then—as black as your hair is white to-day. You were beautiful—beautiful and treacherous! Oh! the fires below are full of such fair fiends as you!"

Gradually the man had fallen into a fearful passion. His whole form shook with the fierceness of his emotions and his voice became hoarse and rasping. He smote his gloved hands together with an energy that was terrible to witness. Then, at the very moment that the horrified girls thought he would seize the cowering woman, he instantly became calm and asked:

"What did your lover do with the child—did he murder it, as he killed Rupert Weston?"

"No, no, no! he did not do that! He left her somewhere with people who would take care of her."

"And you consented to the separation? You allowed him to dispose of the child of the man you so basely deceived? Great heavens! did you have no heart at all!"

"No, I did not consent to it; I knew nothing about it. At that time I was nearly wild with remorse. My thoughts were on the one who was dead, the only man I ever loved, Rupert Weston."

"Stop!" thundered Captain Nameless, with one gloved hand uplifted. "Do you dare! Have a care what you say! Love Rupert Weston! Such love as yours was is worse than the treacherous affection of a serpent. Do not speak of it again to me! I did not come here to listen to such talk. I came to find Rupert Weston's child or learn her fate. Where is she?"

Once more he asked the question, and suddenly turning, the woman of the snow-white hair pointed toward the girls still cowering in each other's arms and fairly shrieked:

"As God is my judge, I believe that she is there!"

And then she fell senseless on the floor of the hidden hut.

For a moment Captain Nameless stood frozen in his tracks, then, without heeding the fallen woman, he sprang toward the girls and glared into their faces. They cowered still further back, but kept their eyes fastened on him with a fascination that could not be broken.

"Great God!" gasped the man of mystery, as he gazed first at one then at the other. "Can her words be true? My brain is afire! I must fight off this spell! I must fight it, fight it, fight it!"

Then he heard a noise behind and whirled him to see Black Jack, the man of the midnight beard, standing in the doorway!

CHAPTER XXXV.

"MET AT LAST"—THE BURNING CABIN.

STRAIGHT into each other's eyes glared the dark-faced man of the hidden hut and the strange chief of the mountain masks. Both seemed suddenly stricken speechless, and it was plainly evident that the meeting was a surprise on Black Jack's part, at least. It is probable that he had not expected to find any one but the white-haired woman within the cabin. Strangely enough, neither of the two men made an immediate move toward a weapon. For several moments the tableau lasted, then the man in the doorway saw the insensible woman on the floor. He probably thought her dead, for he started forward with an exclamation of horror.

"Who did this?"

Like an enraged lion he whirled on the man in mask, half-crouching in his tracks as if on the point of launching himself at Captain Nameless's throat. The Mountain Mystery was still glaring at him as if he saw a hated foe and anticipated vengeance for some terrible wrong. Their eyes met again in a steady glare.

"Who did this?" repeated Black Jack, pointing at the prostrate woman. "Did you dare? If so, I will have your blood!"

Even then the mask did not speak, but continued to gaze fixedly at the enraged man. A burning light seemed to fill the twin orbs that gleamed through the holes in the mask—a light that was terrible to see. The man of the hidden hut misconstrued his silence.

"Is your tongue frozen with fear?" demanded the dark-faced man. "Speak, or I will tear it out by the roots!"

"What will you have me say?"

"Who harmed this woman?"

"Who harmed her? You, you miserable wretch! You harmed her! You wrecked her life! You decoyed her from her home! You ruined her life and murdered her husband! It was your knife that pierced the heart of poor Rupert Weston! It was your hand that fired the building in which he was burned even to his bones! With you that woman fled away through the night. You had promised her a life of happiness, luxury and love. What has been her life since that terrible night? Those white hairs answer louder than words. She has known nothing but exile, ruin and remorse, degradation and despair. Not one of the bright scenes which you painted have come true. Miserable wretch! Answer your own question: Who harmed that woman?"

And now the dark-faced man shrunk and cowered before those flashing eyes. He seemed like a whipped cur as he crouched in front of the chief of the mountain masks and listened to the thunder of the strange man's voice. Every spark of courage and manhood seemed to have departed from him and he was like a cringing slave before an imperious master. His tongue seemed frozen with the fear of which he had accused the other.

Like an accusing god the man in blue towered above the other, fire almost seeming to dart from the eye-holes of the mask. One of his clinched hands was uplifted, while with the index finger of the other he pointed straight at the cowering man of the hidden hut.

"You do not speak," he cried. "Answer!"

At this point Black Jack managed to gasp:

"Who in God's name are you?"

"Who am I? I am one who knows you well, miserable deceiver! I am one who knows the blackness of your vile heart! I have looked for you long, and we are met at last!"

There was a world of triumph and hatred in those last three words, and the black beard fairly trembled with sudden fear. Yet he was a man whose courage was not usually shaken.

"Met at last!" repeated Captain Nameless. "I have felt that the hour of my vengeance was drawing near; now I know it is at hand. I have found the ones for whom I have searched in vain many years. I had almost given up the hunt when fortune brings them to me. And I know them when I see them. Ah-a! I know you, miserable deceiver!"

"You lie!" gasped Black Jack, with a sudden flash of courage. "You do not know me!"

The chief of the Blue Coats made a move as if to take a quick step forward, but did not do so.

"Do you really believe your own words?" he sneered. "Do you imagine that I cannot see the blood-stain on your hands? It is there! Know you! You are the murderer of Rupert Weston!"

In an instant those words seemed once more to shake the courage of the black-bearded man, for he shrunk back with a quick indrawing of his breath; but he managed to faintly gasp:

"Your proof?"

"I have proof enough. That woman there upon the floor will not deny it."

As Captain Nameless mentioned the unconscious woman, Black Jack suddenly straightened up again.

"You have killed her!" he cried.

"No, she is not dead."

But with sudden fury, the man of the hidden hut leaped toward the blue-coated figure, forgetting to draw a weapon. Captain Nameless seemed expecting such an attack, for he met his foe more than half-way. In another instant a terrible struggle was taking place in the cabin beneath the cliff; but it was as brief as fierce. With a sudden mighty effort, the Mountain Mystery hurled his antagonist to the floor and pinned him there with one knee, while a knife gleamed at the conquered man's throat.

"Ah-r-r-gh!" snarled the man with the knife, his breathing sounding like escaping steam. "I have you now! Vengeance is mine! You shall not escape me!"

Black Jack closed his eyes, evidently expecting instant death; but still the terrible knife did not fall. With a swiftness that was remarkable, Captain Nameless produced some stout cords and bound the conquered man's hands behind him, rendering him practically helpless. Then he arose to his feet and surveyed his work with satisfaction.

"Wretched man," he said, slowly, "you are in my power at last. You cannot escape my vengeance. The hour of retribution draws near."

Black Jack did not speak, but his face worked strangely with a tumult of emotions. It was

evident that he did not intend to ask for mercy. Probably he knew that he would simply waste his breath, for there was not such a thing as mercy in those gleaming, fiery eyes.

Once more Captain Nameless folded his arms and stood in silence. He seemed to be musing. He cut a strangely picturesque figure as he stood there in the flaring firelight. Finally he whirled toward the spot where the girls were still watching him.

"Young ladies," he said, speaking as calmly as if nothing of an unusual nature had happened, "you need have no fear, for I assure you that you shall not be harmed. I know that you have friends who are searching for you, and those friends are not very far away. I promise you that you shall soon be with them. You have seen and heard things which were far from pleasant, for which I am truly sorry. I will try to spare you as much as possible in the future. Do not be alarmed at anything that may happen; all will be well with you in the end."

Then, bowing low before them, he strode to the door and blew a shrill, screeching blast on a small silver whistle—a blast that cut like a keen blade through the still night air. For a moment he listened at the door, hearing the echo of his whistle die away in the distance, and then from the distant height came an answering whistle. When he heard this he turned back into the cabin.

"You will prepare for a small journey, ladies," he said, his voice sounding soft and musical. "I dislike to put you to so much trouble, but it is absolutely necessary. You cannot remain unprotected in this cabin, for the red fiends might find you here. I assure you that you shall be treated with the utmost consideration, and in no case are you to consider yourself captives."

They could scarcely believe that it was the same man whom they had seen so convulsed with fury a short time before. The change was marvelous indeed.

Turning from the girls, Captain Nameless approached the white-haired woman, who still lay motionless on the floor. For several moments he stood gazing down into that placid, sorrow-marked face, and it seemed to the girls that there was an aspect of sadness in his attitude.

Slowly the minutes passed till at last there was a slight sound at the door and the chief of the mountain masks turned to see several of his own men there.

"We are here, captain," said one, saluting after a military style.

"So I see, Lieutenant Brisk. There is work ahead."

Then he turned to Black Jack and said in cold, chilling tones:

"Look around you—look your last upon the hidden nest that has been your home. When you pass through that door again you go out forever. Perhaps you and that guilty woman have been happy here, but if you—"

"Hold!" cried the dark-bearded prisoner, making an attempt to rise. "Listen to me! Since that wretched night I have not known one moment of happiness! But there is a mistake here! Lyla was never guilty of wrongdoing! I swear it by the heavens above us!"

A scornful laugh came from the lips hidden beneath the mask.

"Wretch!" thundered Captain Nameless, "do not stain your soul with more lies—with vile perjury!"

"It is not a lie! Listen, man—you must listen! Let me tell you the truth! I swear by the grave of my sainted mother that Lyla was guilty of no intentional wrong! I can—"

"Take him away," came coldly from the lips of the chief, and despite his pleading and curses, Black Jack was carried from the cabin.

At their leader's order one of the men whom he addressed as "doctor" set about restoring the white-haired woman to consciousness. He asked the girls to help him, which they willingly did, and after ten minutes of persistent efforts, the woman opened her eyes.

"She will be all right now," the "doctor" announced, as he prepared a colorless liquid and gave it to her with the directions to drink it all.

Then two of the Blue Coats came and conducted the maidens from the cabin. Shortly after the white-haired woman followed, appearing as strong as ever.

Half of the secluded pocket was flooded by moonlight; half lay in the shadow. But when, half an hour later, Little Rocks led his friends to the place, the entire pocket was lighted by the red gleams of a fire which poured out from beneath the cliff where the hidden hut had stood.

"Great serpents!" cried the scout. "Their cabin whar she tuck ther gals is all afire!"

"My God!" groaned Victor. "Have they perished in the flames?"

Then a wild, mocking laugh came to their ears, and in the red light of the doomed cabin, dancing as if in fiendish glee, they saw the misshapen figure of Scar-Face, the mountain monster!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

INTO THE BLUE COATS' CAVE—TRAPPED!

"LOOKER thet infarnal imp o' Satan!" snapped Montana Jim. "See him prance roun' thar in

ther firelight! By ther holy poker! I hev hafe a mine ter perferate his hide with er lead pill!"

"Restrain your murderous inclinations, James of the hubble bones," cautioned Handy Harry. "By so doing you will save a good lead bullet for a more worthy object. It would be a sin to shoot that poor wretch; besides that, if any one is going to drop the infernal imp I want the pleasure of doing the job."

"Murder!" exclaimed Max. "It would be no murder to end the life of that demon. It is probable that he fastened the cabin-door and burned the building with the woman and the girls in it."

The young lawyer caught Little Rocks by the arm.

"You are sure they came here?" He demanded, excitedly.

"Sart'in. I follered the ole white head tell she foun' ther gals, then she came hyer an' I follered. She went down thar an' tuck 'em into the cabin under that cliff."

"I do not doubt your word, for I found Viona here once. The question is, were the females in the cabin when it was fired?"

"An' who fired it?" added Rocks.

"Thet is answered easy ernuff," nodded the old prospector. "Thet infarnal critter o' ther humped back an' mixed up mug done it. He's ther one!"

"Then let's go down there and wring the truth from his lips if we have to roast him over the fire which he started!"

Then they made haste to descend into the pocket.

The deformed, dancing in the red glow, did not seem to notice the approach of the party till they were all around him. Even then he continued to dance and shout, flinging his arms aloft in a wild way and whirling round and round. Suddenly Montana Jim's heavy hand fell upon the misshapen creature's shoulder, and Handy Harry's revolver stared him in the face.

"Choke off a little, will ye?" snapped the mountain man.

"Or in other words," said the sport, blandly, "suspend your gyrations for a brief period of time. We wish to fire our mouths at you a few."

The scarred imp paused, crouching in his tracks and scowling blackly as he appeared about to spring upon the cool card-sharp.

"There," nodded Harry, surveying his aspect with apparent satisfaction, "that is just a little more like it. You do not remind me so very much of a jumping-jack. Now if you would just pare that unpleasant scowl off your classic features, you would be quite passable."

"Oh, let up on your chin!" growled Jim.

"How do you s'pose ther critter's goin' ter understan' it? Jest let me do ther torkin'."

"Correct, oh mighty mangler of the English language. I am dumb. Fire ahead."

"Now looker hyer, you purty dog," said the veteran miner, giving Scar-Face a shake; "I am goin' ter ax ye a few questions, an' I want straight answers. It will be ther best fer you if ye don't try enny funny business. Do you savvy?"

The deformed did not reply, but scowled as blackly as before.

"Fu'st," resumed Jim, "who sot ther fire?"

Still the scarred creature remained silent.

"James," drawled the sport, "I would advise you to look in the animal's mouth and see if it bath a tongue."

At this Scar-Face favored Harry with a black look.

"Speak up!" cried the old miner, giving the deformed another shake. "If you do not answer, it will be ther wuss fer you!"

But with sudden strength that was quite unexpected, the threatened creature tore himself from the old prospector's grasp and sprung away a step. In a moment weapons in the hands of each of the six covered him, but he showed no inclination to run. Instead he stopped and stood glaring at them, wheezing and growling with every breath. As he crouched there in the red light of the burning building, he looked like a fiend incarnate.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed. "Who dares to threaten Scar-Face, the Mountain Monarch? Put up your weapons, you poor fools! Do you think that I fear them or you? Bah! I know not fear! You cannot harm such as I, for I have the protection of Satan himself."

"James," came smoothly from Handy Harry, "hadn't I better try the animal a few rounds just to see what it is made of? If I do not bring it down, then the rest of the crowd can have a chance to do some pistol practice."

"For heaven's sake, let us waste no time in folly!" cried Victor. "Perhaps this being did not set the fire. It may be that Buck Dingle has found the girls again and fired the cabin. Get at the truth as quickly as possible."

"Ah-ugh! the ones who fired the cabin are far away," cried Scar-Face. "I love the fire—the beautiful fire! Oh, I have reason for loving it! Fire made me the beauty that I am! Fire is full of terrors for the sinful, for in the fires below they shall be punished to all eternity. Ha! ha! ha! I love the fire! I have passed through flames ten times hotter than those leaping there.

I came out alive, but you can see the marks upon my face. Oh, yes! I love it! *love it! LOVE IT!*"

"The man is mad!" exclaimed Dave Burke. "We shall not be able to learn the truth from him."

But the Montana fortune-hunter strode forward in a menacing attitude.

"You can put us on ther right trail ef you will," Jim cried; "an' by Glory! you've got ter do et or we'll chuck ye inter that fire, which I more'n hafe believe you sot!"

Once more Scar-Face laughed wildly.

"You talk like a fool!" he sneered. "Would you thrust me into that furnace? I defy you! I am the monarch of these mountains! Let me tell you something: I have but to crock my finger and Satan will send a legion of demons to protect me!"

"My dear sir," drawled Handy Harry, "just call up your demons, and we will chuck the whole mess of 'em into the fire there. It will simply make the occasion a bit livelier, for if there are anything that we do delight to roast in a good hot fire it must be genuine old-fashioned demons. Let the band toot and the entertainment begin."

"You can't skeer us with yer demon story," asserted old Jim. "W'at we are arter is ther truth, an' we're goin' ter hev it or cook ye, bones, hide, ha'r an' hoofs. Who sot ther fire? Whar are ther gals as wuz in thet cabin afore it wuz sot?"

"Who set the fire? Ha! ha! He wore a blue coat and a mask. But he is far away now."

"Great Jupiter!" gasped Jim. "Cap'n Nameless, I'll bet a boss!"

"Oh, no!" laughed the deformed. "He did not set the fire, but he was here. One of his men set the fire. It was the chief of the Blue Coats who told him to apply the match. They are all far, far away."

"Perhaps he lies," said Max, who was fairly atremble with eagerness and suspense. "I believe he set the fire himself."

"I believe he is tellin' ther truth," asserted Little Rocks. "Go on, Jim, an' let's hear w'at more he knows."

"Wuz Cap'n Nameless ther man as ordered this fire sot?" asked the old prospector.

"He calls himself that," answered Scar-Face; "but he is no more nameless than am I. I know who he is. His blue mask cannot conceal his identity from me. He is a man who has become a hermit because of a woman's treachery. I know the woman, too. Had I never seen her these scars would not disfigure my face. Captain Nameless, as he calls himself, was caught in the same web. But the woman is in his power now."

"What is that?" eagerly demanded Victor.

"Did he carry the ladies away with him?"

"Oh, yes!" chuckled the creature of the fire-marked face. "He carried the woman of the snow-white hair, the girl whose hair has caught the sunlight and the one whose tresses are like the midnight darkness. He has them all."

"Thank God! they have not perished in the fire!" breathed Victor.

"But it is possible that their fate may be as terrible, for this Captain Nameless is, without doubt, a heartless bandit."

"Oh, no!" cried Scar-Face, shaking his head.

"He is not a robber; he is a miner. He has many men, and they work in a big mine underground. I know where it is, for I have been there many times. Ha! ha! ha! I can go where I choose. The Blue Coats do not dream that I know a secret passage that leads into their underground home where they dig the yellow sands and wash them in the water of the Lost River which flows through the big cave. Oh! I know all their secrets. Stone walls cannot stop Scar-Face."

"W'at is this?" exclaimed old Jim. "This creature knows—or pretends to know—a secret entrance to Captain Nameless's cave. Perhaps he will lead us thar. W'at say ye, pards—if he will lead us shell we trust him?"

"Sure," was Handy Harry's prompt decision, with which the others agreed, feeling sure that they could guard against treachery.

Indeed, it seemed to be their last chance to rescue the lost maidens. If they could enter Captain Nameless's underground home without any of the Blue Coats being aware of it, might they not be able to accomplish the rescue of the girls? For a few moments they discussed the situation and the prospect, then they turned to Scar-Face and besought him to lead them into the cave of the mountain masks. He hesitated but a moment, then he told them to follow him and moved rapidly away. Soon the pocket where the hidden hut was still burning was left far behind.

It was a long weary tramp, but the deformed seemed tireless, and before day dawned they found themselves in the cave of the Blue Coats. With the silent tread of so many panthers they followed their strange guide through the darkness. They realized that their lives were in the hands of the deformed, but once in the cave they could not back out. Finally, the unseen pilot whispered:

"Still now! We will look into the great

chamber through which flows the underground river."

A few seconds later they found themselves looking down into a huge chamber which was partially lighted by what appeared to be burning jets of natural gas, the light of which fell upon the forms of several men who seemed to be working at some miners' sluices near a dark and narrow stream of water that flowed silently through the big cave. None of the men wore the blue coats and masks of Captain Nameless's followers, but were dressed in the rough garments peculiar to most miners. It was probable that the masks and soldier-like coats were only worn when the men left the cave on some expedition.

"Great Jupiter!" whispered old Jim. "Can it be that thet's ther Lost Placer down thar?"

Not one of the men replied. They were filled with wonder at the strange sight of the men working by gaslight far down in the dark recesses of the great cave of the Big Horn Mountains. Soon Scar-Face whispered:

"Follow; I will lead you to the chamber where the chief of the blue-coated miners usually confines his prisoners."

Once more they moved onward through the darkness—the terrible Erebus-like blackness. They could not help feeling that they might never leave the underground chambers alive, for they knew that their fate was in the hands of the man of the fire-marked face. Down a flight of stone steps they went; it seemed that the steps would never end. When they reached the bottom they paused a moment while Scar-Face fumbled in the dark.

"Go on."

It was the voice of the deformed, and without knowing what lay before them, they obeyed. Suddenly there was a harsh, grating sound behind them and at the same instant a gas jet over their heads burst into flame, showing them their surroundings.

They were alone in a small, square chamber the walls of which were solid rock. There seemed to be but one door to the place, and that was closed.

Their deformed guide had vanished!

With an oath, Montana Jim leaped toward the door and tried to tear it open.

It would not stir!

"Trapped!" he hissed, as he turned a white face toward his motionless companions.

Then they heard a low, mocking laugh that seemed to come from beyond the wall of solid stone!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

REUNITED—SILENT SETH FIRES A SHOT.

"TRAPPED!"

That word fully described their position. The mad man of the mountains had deceived and betrayed them, and they knew that the mocking laugh which they heard came from his lips. For a moment there was a dead silence, then Handy Harry quietly observed:

"My eyes reveal to me five consummate asses, and, had I a mirror, I would be able to see the reflection of the sixth. A grand collection in one corral."

Catching the spirit of the remark, Little Rocks said:

"I propose that we all turn to an' kick out each other's brains. Ef enny one wants ter find w'at faw brains I hev, I advise 'em ter plant their kicks in ther rear bosom o' my breeches."

The entire party was filled with consternation and rage. They had believed that Scar-Face and Captain Nameless were enemies, and for that reason they had trusted themselves to the deformed, thinking that he would do anything to injure the chief of the Blue Coats. The deformed had played his part well till he had them safely in the toils.

"Is there no way of escape?" asked Victor, gazing round the chamber.

"We will soon discover," declared Max, as he set about examining the place. "We have been nicely tricked, but we still have our weapons and can fight for our lives. I do not propose to be cut down like a dog without making the least resistance."

A close survey of the place served to convince them that there was only one way of escape and that by the door.

"Ef we had some hatchets we'd soon make thet look sick," declared the little scout.

"We have our knives," said Jim.

After a short consultation, they decided to attack the wooden door with their knives, for activity of any kind seemed better than sitting quietly down and waiting for the hour of slaughter.

But before their knives had touched the door it swung open and Captain Nameless stepped into the chamber.

"Hold!" he cried, as he saw himself covered by the weapons of the entire party. "We are friends."

"Perchance you speakest rightly, Sir Knight of the Sky-blue Raiment," quoth the cool sport; "but I'll be hanged if it is not the first we have heard about it! In fact, I was inclined to think that we were enemies."

"We are friends for the time, at least. I have no intention of harming you."

"How kind! But what if we should feel an inclination to harm you?"

"Fool!" exclaimed the chief of the mountain masks. "You are all in my power."

"That may be; but it seems to us that you are in our power."

"We will not argue about that, although by simply crooking my finger I could send you all into eternity. Scar-Face saved me much trouble when he brought you here, for I should have been forced to hunt you up. The two maidens you are searching for are in this cave and therefore safe from outlaws or red-skins. You shall see them. The last act of the great tragic drama of life will take place in this cavern; then you all will be set free and allowed to depart. I have no evil intentions against you."

At this our friends breathed easier, although they knew that the strange man might be deceiving them. But he appeared to be speaking in an honest manner. Several significant looks passed between the men who had fallen into the power of the mysterious men of the mountains, then Handy Harry said:

"Oh, mighty chief, we are prone to trust you, even though we know that we may be confounded jackasses by doing so. But if you go crooked—Well, move ahead; we will follow."

Without another word, Captain Nameless lighted a small lamp, which he produced from beneath his coat, and turned from the chamber. Holding their weapons ready for instant use, the little party followed.

The masked man led them along a winding corridor till they came to a spot where a bright light streamed from the opening to a chamber, then he halted an instant and pointed into the chamber, saying:

"The young ladies are there."

Victor sprang forward and peered into the chamber. Then, with a cry of delight, he leaped through the arched opening. The others quickly followed, and the first persons their eyes rested upon were the lost maidens. In an instant old Dave Burke had folded Viona in his arms, but the laughing, weeping girl still clung to one of Victor's hands. With bowed head and crimson cheeks Rose waited till she felt Max's breath upon her neck and heard him whisper in her ear:

"Found at last, my mountain queen!"

Handy Harry looked coolly around and saw beyond the maidens the white-haired woman reclining on a couch, while near at hand Black Jack lay upon the rocky floor, bound hand and foot and guarded by the two armed men who wore blue masks. In one corner beyond the man of the raven beard lay the notorious outlaw and desperado, Buck Dingle, likewise bound and guarded.

"Whew!" softly whistled the cool card-sharp.

"It is plain that the nameless chief has been raking them in."

Through cavern vaults ten times blacker than midnight darkness—through regions of eternal night—on to the untrodden shores of Nowhere—murmuring, gurgling, sighing and moaning flows the Lost River of the Big Horn Mountains. No man knows if it ever comes to the surface after disappearing into the black hole at Lost River Pocket. From that point its course is an unexplored mystery. Although very deep at certain times of the year, the stream is narrow, in fact, is nothing more than a creek, although the Indians call it Lost River.

Silent Seth was not killed when shot by the outlaw as he watched the maidens in the pocket below. The bullet had cut along his skull and deprived him of consciousness for the time. His leap outward from the rocks was involuntary, and he was unconscious when the dark waters swept him into the yawning hole. When he became conscious again he found himself lying partially in the water but with his head and shoulders upon a mass of rock which projected above the bosom of the underground river. All around was the most intense darkness.

"Great heavens! where am I?"

The sound of his voice startled him. The hollow echo told him that he was in an underground chamber of some kind. His head was throbbing with a dull pain that was very unpleasant. After a few moments, he was able to collect his thoughts and remembered what had happened up to the time that he was shot. He soon reasoned that he must have fallen into the river and been swept into the black hole. The thought filled him with horror.

"My God!" he hoarsely gasped. "There is probably no way of escaping from this place!"

Of a sudden life seemed very dear. He had thought that he was ready to die, but with death staring him in the face, he discovered that he still loved life.

He started up and felt around him in the darkness. Close by his hand struck against a wall of solid stone; on the other side he could touch nothing. The water, in which his feet still lay, ran swiftly on through the darkness.

He soon decided that if he was going to escape he must do so by forcing his way up the stream and emerging into the pocket. But he knew not how far the water had carried him. He might be near the opening, or he might be far, far away.

Carefully he let himself down into the water till his feet touched the bottom, finding that he was submerged nearly to the shoulders. The stream was very swift, and he soon found that he could make no progress against it unless he clung to the jagged wall with his hands. Even then his progress was slow and difficult.

As he advanced the water became swifter and swifter, and he heard it gurgling in a singular manner just ahead. After a long struggle he reached the spot from whence the gurgling sound came. Then a wailing cry of despair echoed through the imprisoned blackness. He had made a fearful discovery.

The rocky wall shut down to the very water's edge!

He could go no further in that direction, for the gurgling sound was made by the water as it poured out from beneath the stony ledge beneath his hand. In an unconscious state he had been carried through that place while entirely submerged by water; but he could never hope to pass back through it to liberty.

"I am doomed!"

How terrible the words sounded in that awful place! Doomed! The stoutest heart would have felt a chill.

For a long time he stood there, clinging to the wall and hoping against hope. At last he turned away. He had resolved to follow the stream on its downward course. He knew not if it ever emerged to the light of day—he felt that he might be passing further and further from light and liberty, but it was useless to remain there.

It is impossible to describe the horrors of the journey through the underground darkness. He knew not how far he went, but it seemed that he traveled miles. Once or twice the current swept him from his feet and bore him swiftly on, but after a time he would manage to get upon his feet. Finally he came to a halt with another cry of dismay.

Once more the rocky wall shut down to the water's edge!

For fully ten minutes the silent man stood there in the darkness, then a sudden determination seized him. But an instant he hesitated, then he drew a long breath, clasped his hands together, and dived, allowing the swift current to sweep him onward to—where?

He remained beneath the water as long as he could, not daring to come to the surface for fear of striking his head against the ledge which shut down upon the water. Finally he was compelled to rise, and his joy was indescribable when he found that he had passed into another chamber. He arose to his feet and found that the water had grown shallower. From that he reasoned that the stream must be growing wider. Once more he went forward, noting that the bottom seemed growing sandy or muddy. It was not long before he halted with a low cry of surprise and delight.

His eye caught the faint gleam of a light far ahead!

It was not long before Silent Seth was looking into the chamber where Scar-Face had shown Montana Jim and his companions the men of Captain Nameless mining near the underground river. The silent man did not approach the underground dwellers, for he doubted that he would be received in a friendly manner. Wringing the water from his clothes, he sat down upon some howlers at a distance and watched the toilers. He found that his revolvers and knife had remained in their places, and knew that if his cartridges were not injured by their soaking, he was not so very bad off.

Hours passed and still he watched the men. He saw one crew relieved by another, but never for a moment did all the men leave the big chamber. He discovered that the exit from the chamber was at the further side, and in order to reach it, he must pass in plain view of the toilers. He was wet, hungry and sleepy. Finally he climbed upon the top of a mass of bowlders, lay down and fell asleep there in the darkness.

He was aroused by voices, and started up to see a band of men not far away beneath the full glare of the natural gas-jets. Two of the men were facing each other, and the light fell upon revolvers in their right hands.

They were about to fight a duel in the great cave!

Seth came near betraying himself by a cry of surprise, for he recognized several of the party. The light fell full upon the faces of Montana Jim and Handy Harry, and one of the duelists was the strange man of the secluded pocket, Black Jack! His foe was the chief of the mountain masks, Captain Nameless. Six or eight of the Blue Coats were standing round.

The first impulse of the unseen witness was to dash down and stop the duel, but he realized that such an attempt might prove a failure. He heard Black Jack say a few words, to which his masked foe replied briefly. Then he heard one of the masked men tell them to take their places and make ready.

"God direct my bullet!" hoarsely whispered the man on the rocks, as he drew and cocked a revolver.

Then, before the fatal signal could be spoken, he took a deliberate aim at Captain Nameless's head and pressed the trigger!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

"Now," said Captain Nameless, when the first joy of the reunion within the cavern chamber had somewhat abated, "let us get to business."

His words attracted the attention of all, and an expectant hush fell over the strange party. The chief of the mountain masks stepped out into the center of the chamber where the gaslight fell full upon his tall, straight figure. For several moments he was silent, as the searching eyes beyond the holes in the blue mask surveyed the strange scene. Finally he began:

"Friends and—foes, you may wonder why I have caused you all to be brought to this cave. I had an object, and my object was principally *vengeance*. Some of you will leave this cave happy; some will *never* leave it! The hour of justice and retribution has come! The mystery of eighteen years shall be made clear and the guilty shall be punished. But first, we must get at the truth."

At a motion from the strange man the ones who were guarding Buck Dingle lifted the notorious outlaw to his feet, and turned him so that the light fell full upon his face. Then Captain Nameless turned to Dave Burke, saying:

"Old man, do you recognize that dastard?"

The rancher started forward with a cry.

"It is the fiend who murdered my wife and stole my child," he exclaimed.

"It's a blamed lie—" the desperado began, but the Blue Coat chief silenced him with a look and a gesture.

"It is the truth!" cried Viona, starting forward, with one hand stretched accusingly toward the cowering wretch.

"That is enough," came from beneath Captain Nameless's mask. "Your doom is sealed, Dingle the Red-handed. Men, do your duty."

Without a word the guards dragged the infamous outlaw from the chamber, their ears being sealed to his prayers and curses. To this day his fate is a mystery; but, certain it is, he never left the great cave of the Big Horn Mountains.

When the outlaw had been removed from the cave-chamber, the man of mystery turned to Dave Burke.

"Sir," said Captain Nameless, pointing toward Viona, "did I hear you call that maiden your child?"

In an instant the old rancher was at the girl's side, while he turned a defiant face toward the masked questioner, replying:

"You did."

Captain Nameless's eyes gleamed strangely.

"Did you speak the truth?"

For an instant Burke hesitated.

"Of course I spoke the truth," he finally answered. "Why do ye ask such a question?"

"I have my reasons, old man, and you will find that it is for your interest to answer truthfully."

At this the rancher's stalwart son started forward angrily, his massive fists clinched as he glared at Captain Nameless.

"Have a care how you talk to him!" he cried. "He is my father!"

"That is correct, my son," observed Handy Harry, who was surveying the scene from where he coolly leaned against the rocky wall. "Always stand by your dad, and if you need any help, I will pull my pops and stand by you. I more than half believe there are enough of us to wallop these gents with the hidden phisogs, anyway, and a good old-fashioned fight would start my blood and do my soul good."

Captain Nameless did not glance toward the speaker, but placed the silver whistle to his lips and blew a short, shrill blast. Almost instantly the arch that led from the chamber was swarming with men, every one of whom held ready weapons.

"You will see," said the chief, calmly, "that you are all completely in my power. It would be worse than suicide for you to begin a battle."

The cool sport took one look at the men, then settled back limply against the wall, faintly murmuring:

"Oh, Moses and the prophets! I don't want to fight more than half as bad as I did."

Once more Captain Nameless turned to Dave Burke.

"Now will you answer my question? Is this girl your own child—your offspring? Is she not an *adopted* daughter?"

Once again the rancher hesitated.

"Speak the truth," commanded Captain Nameless, sternly.

"She is *not* my own darter," confessed Burke, bowing his head.

At this Max started forward with an exclamation of amazement, but the chief of the Blue Coats waved him back. As for Viona, she seemed more astounded than any of the others. She had never dreamed that she was not the old rancher's true daughter, and the revelation fairly dazed her.

"How long has this girl been with you?" asked the mask.

"Near onto eighteen year."

"And you have treated her as your own child?"

"Yes, and loved her as sich. Not even my

son has dreamed the truth, though I meant to tell them both, some time."

"You have done well," said the mysterious man, "and you shall not go unrewarded. But now, what is the girl's true name?"

"I do not know. A strange man brought her to my house one stormy night and begged me in the name of charity to take the child and care for her. I could not refuse. He asked my name and then went away. I have never seen him since that night."

"Is that the man yonder?" asked Captain Nameless, pointing to Black Jack, who was still bound, but who had been lifted to his feet by the men who were guarding him.

The rancher scanned the dark-bearded man closely, but shook his head.

"I cannot tell," he replied. "I saw but little of the man that night so many years ago."

"Is your name David Burke?" asked Captain Nameless's captive.

"It is."

"Then I am the man who left a child with you eighteen years ago."

"That settles it," said the man of mystery, turning to Viona and gazing steadily at her for several moments. "Girl, that white-haired woman yonder is your mother!"

"My child!" cried the strange woman of the secluded pocket, starting up from the couch.

And then the wondering maiden slowly approached and knelt beside the couch.

Captain Nameless made a signal and Black Jack was borne from the chamber.

"Gentleman," said the captain of the mountain masks, "the final act of the tragic drama is about to take place. Such of you as would like to witness it and see fair play can follow."

"That includes yours truly," nodded Handy Harry. "I am always in for fair play, although I am called a gambler."

"Reckon we'll skip erlong, eh, Jim?" said Little Rocks, as he sidled toward his big friend.

"Bet yer boots!" was the old prospector's grim reply.

From the chamber they went straight to the big cave through which flowed the underground river. There they found Black Jack freed from his bonds. Preparations were being made for a duel.

"Dastard!" exclaimed Captain Nameless, as his eyes fell upon the man of the midnight beard; "the hour of vengeance has come! Choose your second!"

Without a word, Black Jack pointed at Handy Harry. The sport came forward all smiles and bowing blandly.

"I thank you for the honor thus bestowed, partner," he said; "and you may wager your socks that you are going to have a fair shake." And then, speaking lower: "If you down the gent in blue, and the rest of the gang attempt to jump you, fight like sin. I will stand by you as long as I can pull trigger."

The arrangements were soon made and the men stood facing each other, waiting for the signal. Suddenly Black Jack started forward crying:

"For God's sake, man, who are you? Remove that mask and let me see your face!"

The chief of the secret miners waved him back, saying:

"To your place! You shall see my face, but not until I have given you your death wound. As you lay dying at my feet I will tear away the mask and you shall see my face! Then, in my moment of vengeance, I will whisper my name in your ear! Back, and make ready!"

Black Jack fell back and the man who was to give the signal stepped forward. A hush fell upon the throng gathered in the great cave.

"All ready!"

The two duelists lift their gleaming weapons.

"Now—one, two—"

Then from the pile of rocks directly behind the man of the black beard a red spout of flame leaped out and the report of a revolver rung through the cave. With a cry, Captain Nameless reeled back and fell to the ground. As he went down, he threw up his hands and his revolver was discharged.

Following the second shot a dark form came tumbling down from the crest of the rock-pile, struck the ground with a thud and lay still!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

The bullet from Silent Seth's revolver had stricken Captain Nameless down, but in return the chief of the Blue Coats had unconsciously fired a shot that brought his would-be assassin tumbling down the rocks to strike at the bottom—dead! Lost River had carried the silent man to his doom.

Revolver in hand, Black Jack stood unharmed.

When Captain Nameless fell several of the men, including Handy Harry, Montana Jim and Little Rocks, rushed toward him. The gaslight fell full upon the man of mystery, showing that his blue mask had fallen from his face. As the card-sharp's eyes fell upon the exposed features he uttered a cry of amazement:

"Scar-Face, by the gods!"

Some of the blue-coated men seemed no less amazed. The face revealed was indeed the

hideously scarred one of the madman of the mountains! But, it seemed impossible that Captain Nameless could be the hideous creature who had haunted the mountain fastnesses and carried terror to reds and whites alike.

"Holy Ham, son of Noah!" gasped Montana Jim. "This yere clean gits me!"

At a motion from one of the masks, the wounded chief was lifted and carried back toward the chamber from whence they had lately come. One of the Blue Coats explained to Handy Harry that he had asked to be carried there if he fell in the duel. Into the chamber they bore him and placed him on a blanket spread upon the ground. One side of his head was covered with blood, but as they lowered him he suddenly started up, fairly shrieking:

"Fire! fire! fire! Help! I am roasting alive! The red flames are all around me! It is like a furnace! My God! will no one save me? Help!"

"Then he fell back upon the blanket and glared around in amazement. After a moment, he put his hand to his head, muttering:

"Where am I? There is no fire. How did I escape?"

The spectators had been strangely affected by the singular scene. Black Jack, still guarded by two of the Blue Coats, stared at the unmasked man as if he saw one risen from the dead. The white-haired woman started up on the couch, her eyes fixed upon that scarred face. Suddenly the wounded man saw her.

"Who is that?" he cried. "Ah! I remember. It has been years since I escaped from the fire. That white-haired woman was once my wife, but she proved false, false, *false*! She fled with a lover, leaving me with his knife in my breast to perish in the flames. Ah! false one of the past! look at the wreck you made! A shattered wreck—at times a madman! But I had that lover in my power to-night. We fought; he gave me this wound. Did I leave him dead in the great chamber?"

The woman sprung up, ran forward and knelt at his side.

"Rupert," she cried—"Rupert! Will you listen to me?"

"If you have anything to say, speak."

"I swear to you by all that the human heart holds dear that I was not false to you! I never had a lover other than yourself after we were married. The man who stabbed you in your own home was *my brother*!"

"Your brother—woman, your brother was in prison at the time!"

"One of them was; one I supposed dead. I had two brothers, you know, neither of which you had ever seen, for I could not tell you that one of them was in prison."

"I knew it just the same, though you supposed that I did not."

"It was my brother who was supposed to be in prison that stabbed you, that black night."

"What is this you say? I cannot understand how such a thing could be. Explain it."

At this point Black Jack stepped forward, saying:

"Rupert Weston, I am John Drake, the man who stabbed you in your own house. If you will listen, I will explain everything as briefly as possible."

"Go on."

"To begin with, I had a younger brother who was almost my exact counterpart in our younger days before either of us grew a beard. There was quite a difference in the color of our eyes, mine being dark and his blue. He went to sea and was reported drowned. I went into business, fell into complications, was finally imprisoned for a crime that I did not commit."

"My brother was not dead, but better for us both had he been. In Corsica he killed a man in self-defense. The man's brothers, three in number, swore a vendetta. Every one knows the terrible nature of a Corsican vendetta. My brother fled from the land, but, like bloodhounds on the trail, the three brothers followed. Twice did they attempt to take his life while he was in Europe and failed. Then he fled to America. The three Corsicans followed, and in New York another attempt was made on his life. By this time he was filled with terror and knew not what to do."

"One day I was amazed when my brother appeared before me in my cell. He was almost broken down with fear. He told me his story, and then made a strange proposition. In his pocket he had a wig that looked exactly like his own hair. We were to exchange clothes, I would don the wig and attempt to pass out as the one who had entered a few moments before. He would remain in the cell a prisoner. His object was to escape the Corsican brothers, although he knew they would all fall upon me. I would have to stand in his shoes and fight the would-be assassins. On his knees he begged me to make the attempt, for he said that he could not hold out against them much longer. He did not seem to think of the danger to which I would be exposed. All he cared for was safety and rest, even if it was purchased with his brother's life. In the end I consented; we changed clothes, I passed the guard and was free."

"From the moment I stepped from that prison-door I was a hunted man. I soon

covered that the three Corsicans were after me. Everywhere I went they followed. I could not get away from them. By day they skulked in my shadow; at night I heard the cat-like tread of their feet. No matter where I went, at least one of them was there. I began to experience some of the horror that my brother had felt, but I resolved to strike back at the assassins. Finally one attempted to stab me one night. A miracle saved me. I tore his dagger from his hand and left it in his heart.

"But there still were two bloodthirsty demons on my trail, and from that time they seemed more cautious, but none the less determined. From place to place they dogged my steps. I tried to get at them, but when I turned they seemed to fade and vanish like phantoms.

The feeling of horror grew upon me. I could not sleep, I could not eat, I was slowly breaking down as my brother had done. I knew that my sister Lyla was married, but I hated to present myself to her—a prison bird! But, finally, in despair, I fled to you, hoping that you could give me some protection. At your very door, almost, one of the Corsicans attempted to take my life. The narrow escape filled me with a terror that I cannot describe.

"It was night when I reached your home. You were gone, but Lyla admitted me. I was in her room telling her my story when we heard light footsteps beyond the door. She did not expect you to return for days. I was sure that one of my Corsican foes was in the house. Quick as thought I turned down the light and waited, dagger in hand. The door softly opened, a dark form appeared—I struck!

"It is impossible to describe what followed—it is unnecessary. In my mad horror and excitement at finding that I had slain my sister's husband, for I believed you dead, I dragged her from the building and set it afire, believing that the flames would conceal the crime for a time. I forced Lyla to fly with me. Her mind was almost shattered by the horror of my mad act. She went. Her child was born, and I left it in the care of kind people; then we hid ourselves amid the mountains. The two surviving Corsican brothers found us, but they met their doom and I buried them both. Finally, we came to these mountains. Time brought our brother, Seth, and to-night, without a doubt, he saved my life by shooting at you when we were about to fight the duel. As you fell you threw up your hands and the bullet from your revolver pierced the brain of the man who was the real cause of all your misery. He lies dead in the great chamber."

Silently Rupert Weston, the man of three names and as many lives, listened to John Drake's story. When it was finished, he arose to his feet and his scarred face wore a noble look as he extended his hand, still incased in the glove which had concealed the marks of the fire.

"John," he said, slowly, "I believe your story. A part of my acts you must know were those of a madman. As Scar-Face I was mad; as Captain Nameless I was little better. With the cunning of a deranged brain I played both parts. Upon my back are arranged some wires and springs with which in a moment I can make the natural-looking hump. This coat is blue on one side and ragged on the other. I can shift it with remarkable quickness. That will explain in a measure my rapid changes from one character to the other. I only had to pull my long hair over my eyes, distort my fire-marked face and I was Scar-Face. Many of my own men did not know that I was other than Captain Nameless, and, God keeping those wild spells from me, I will never personate that character again.

"I discovered this mine in the great cave of the Big Horn Mountains and gathered these men around me, giving them all an equal share. With one or two exceptions, they have all proved obedient and faithful. I know not why, but I fancy that I wielded some kind of a strange influence over them that made them afraid of me. The golden sands in the great chamber are about exhausted, and the men have all expressed a desire to get away. They shall go now when they please. No more is it necessary for them to wear the blue coats and masks which my fancy dictated.

"And now," turning to the white-haired woman and Viona, "shall not the black past be buried in the grave of forgetfulness and may not we all look forward to a peaceful and happy future?"

For reply, they rushed into his outstretched arms and were folded to his bosom, as he lifted his eyes and said solemnly, with an overflowing heart:

"Great God, I thank thee!"

Seth Drake, the silent man of this story, was buried in the great chamber where he met his death. His tomb is forever sealed, for when Rupert Weston left the place he caused heavy explosions to block the entrances behind him.

The entire party escaped from the mountains in safety. The Blue Coats disbanded forever, each with a good supply of "yellow" in his possession and with the blessing of the man

whom they had once known as "Captain Nameless."

Montana Jim and Handy Harry gave up all hope of ever finding the "Lost Placer," and I am also pleased to say that the sport also gave up the pasteboards. He went into business and was successful, and to-day many a man is proud to call Tracy Harrison his friend. Jim is still adrift somewhere in the West, an old man but healthy and strong, apparently good for many years to come.

Little Rocks was one of the victims of Custer's fatal battle, and every one who knew him knows that he fell fighting like a man.

In time there was a double wedding. Rose, whose life mystery was never solved, became Max Burke's bride, and Viona, blushing and beautiful, joined hands for life with Victor, manly and brave. Until his death Max's father found a home with his children, but he did not survive his wife many years.

Together, in a quiet Western town, dwell the man and woman of sorrow, Rupert Weston and his wife. Their lives, at one time so full of tempest and darkness, now slip calmly away like a sunlit river flowing peacefully to the sea. Sometimes they heard from John, who is far away seeking forgetfulness of the past in the busy whirl of the world. And sometimes Victor and Viona come to see them. Then the usually quiet house is merry with the voices and laughter of children.

THE END.

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- 390 The Giant Cupid; or Cibuta John's Jubilee.
- 422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
- 436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
- 452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulip from Texas.
- 473 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
- 499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
- 519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
- 557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Old Riddles' Greatest Riddle.
- 565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
- 580 Shadowing a Shadow.

MISCELLANEOUS.

- 6 Wildcat Bob. By Edward L. Wheeler.
- 9 Handy Andy. By Samuel Lover.
- 10 Vidocq, the French Police Spy. By himself.
- 11 Midsbipman Easy. By Captain Marryatt.
- 32 B'hoys of Yale; or, The Scrapes of Collegians. By John D. Vose.
- 60 Wide Awake, the Robber King. By F. Dumont.
- 68 The Fighting Trapper. By Capt. J. F. C. Adams.
- 76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
- 78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.
- 102 The Masked Band. By George L. Aiken.
- 110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.
- 125 The Blacksmith Outlaw. By H. Ainsworth.
- 133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.
- 140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
- 144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.
- 146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
- 152 Captain Ironnerve, the Counterfeiter Chief.
- 158 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
- 166 Owlet, the Robber Prince. By S. R. Urban.
- 179 Conrad, the Convict. By Prof. Gildersleeve.
- 190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexander Dumas.
- 261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt. By Col. Jo Yards.
- 275 The Smuggler Cutter. By J. D. Conroy.
- 312 Kinkfoot Karl, the Mountain Scourge. By Morris Redwing.
- 330 Cop Colt, the Quaker City Detective. By C. Morris.
- 350 Flash Falcon, the Society Detective. By Weldon J. Cobb.
- 353 Bart Brennan; or, The King of Straight Flush. By John Cuthbert.
- 366 The Telegraph Detective. By George Henry Morse.
- 410 Sarah Brown, Detective. By K. F. Hill.
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- 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
- 94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
- 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
- 104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
- 109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
- 116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
- 121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
- 128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
- 131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trail.
- 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
- 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
- 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
- 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
- 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
- 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
- 184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
- 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
- 255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
- 259 Cutlass and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
- 281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
- 307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
- 318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
- 325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
- 329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
- 336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
- 341 The Sea Desperado.
- 346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
- 362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
- 364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
- 369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
- 373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
- 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
- 388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
- 393 The Convict Captain.
- 399 The New Monte Cristo.
- 418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
- 425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
- 435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
- 446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
- 457 The Sea Insurgent.
- 469 The Lieutenant Detective.
- 476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer.
- 482 Ocean Tramps.
- 489 The Pirate Hunter.
- 493 The Scouts of the Sea.
- 510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
- 516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
- 524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
- 530 The Savages of the Sea.
- 540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
- 546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
- 553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
- 560 The Man from Mexico.
- 581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
- 587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 279 The Gold Dragoon; or, The California Blood-hound.
- 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
- 385 Wild Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
- 405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
- 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
- 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
- 437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
- 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
- 449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
- 455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
- 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
- 470 The Duke of Dakota.
- 479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
- 486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
- 492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
- 498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
- 506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
- 513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
- 521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
- 531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
- 539 Old Doubledark, the Willy Detective.
- 551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
- 563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honeysuckle.
- 575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
- 585 Dan Dixon's Double.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 1 A Hard Crowd; or, Gentleman Sam's Sister.
- 4 The Kidnapper; or, The Northwest Shanghai.
- 29 Tiger Dick, Faro King; or, The Cashier's Crime.
- 54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.
- 80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
- 114 The Gentleman from Pike.
- 171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
- 251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
- 280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
- 299 Three of a Kind; or, Tiger Dick, Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport.
- 338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
- 359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
- 380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
- 404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.
- 431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.
- 472 Six Foot Si; or, The Man to "Tie To."
- 502 Bareback Buck, the Centaur of the Plains.
- 522 The Champion Three.
- 544 The Back to Back Pards.
- 567 Captain Midnight, the Man of Craft.
- 583 Captain Adair, the Cattle King.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.
- 31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
- 33 Overland Kit; or, The Idyl of White Pine.
- 34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
- 35 Kentuck, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
- 36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
- 38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
- 41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
- 42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
- 49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
- 56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
- 59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
- 63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
- 72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
- 75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor Prison and Street.
- 77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
- 79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
- 81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
- 84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
- 91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
- 93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
- 97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
- 101 The Man from New York.
- 107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
- 112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
- 130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
- 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
- 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
- 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
- 320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
- 349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
- 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
- 363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
- 370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
- 376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
- 381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
- 384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
- 391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
- 408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
- 419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
- 423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
- 440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
- 461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
- 465 The Actor Detective.
- 475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
- 490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
- 497 The Fresh in Texas.
- 520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
- 529 The Fresh in New York.
- 537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
- 556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.
- 562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
- 570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
- 577 Tom of California.
- 586 The Silver Sharp Detective.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

- 28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.
- 30 Gospel George; or, Fiery Fred, the Outlaw.
- 40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
- 45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
- 47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
- 50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
- 64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
- 67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
- 71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
- 88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
- 105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
- 119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
- 127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
- 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
- 165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
- 170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
- 180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
- 197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
- 201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
- 233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
- 241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
- 249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
- 257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Hard Man from 'Way Back.
- 283 Slick Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
- 286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
- 292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
- 302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
- 317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
- 324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
- 331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
- 389 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
- 345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
- 351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
- 355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
- 360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
- 367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
- 372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
- 379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
- 387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
- 395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
- 403 The Nameless Sport.
- 409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
- 416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
- 426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Spy of the Secret Service.
- 433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
- 438 Oklahoma Nick.
- 443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
- 450 The Rustler Detective.
- 458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
- 466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
- 474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.
- 488 The Thoroughbred Sport.
- 495 Rattlepate Rob; or, The Roundhead's Reprisal.
- 504 Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba.
- 514 Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng.
- 527 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.
- 535 Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.
- 541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve; or, The Muck-a-Mucks of Animas.
- 547 The Buried Detective; or, Saul Sunday's Six Sensations.
- 555 Grip-Sack Sid, the Sample Sport.
- 564 The Grip-Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.
- 576 Silver-Tongued Sid.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.

- 278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.
- 294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
- 321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
- 335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
- 340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
- 347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
- 352 The Desperate Dozen.
- 365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
- 374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
- 382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
- 392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
- 400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
- 407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
- 413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
- 421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
- 434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
- 441 The California Sharp.
- 447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
- 453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
- 460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
- 468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
- 480 Hawkspare, the Man with a Secret.
- 487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
- 496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
- 505 Phil Fox, the Gentle Spotter.
- 512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
- 523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
- 532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
- 543 The Magnate Detective.
- 550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
- 559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
- 569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
- 579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.

BY JACKSON KNOX—"Old Hawk."

- 386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.
- 424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
- 444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.
- 451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
- 462 The Circus Detective.
- 467 Mainwaring, the Salamander.
- 477 Dead-arm Brandt.
- 485 Rowlock, the Harbor Detective.
- 494 The Detective's Spy.
- 501 Springsteel Steve, the Retired Detective.
- 509 Old Falcon, the Thunderbolt Detective.
- 515 Short-Stop Maje, the Diamond Field Detective.
- 536 Old Falcon's Foe; or, The Matchless Detective's Swell Job.
- 548 Falconbridge, the Sphinx Detective.
- 561 The Thug King; or, The Falcon Detective's Invisible Foe.
- 574 Old Falcon's Double.
- 582 Joram, the Detective Expert.

BY BUFFALO BILL (Hon. W. F. Cody).

- 53 Death-Tracker, the Chief of Scouts.
- 83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
- 243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
- 304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
- 319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
- 394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
- 397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
- 401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
- 414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.

LATEST AND NEW ISSUES.

- 588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City; or, Hoist by His Own Petard. By J. E. Badger.
- 589 Prince Hal, the Rattling Detective; or, Pat Lyon, the Master Locksmith. By Charles Morris.
- 590 Gentle Jack, the High Roller from Humbug; or, The Dark Deal at Doubledeck. By Wm. R. Eyster.
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